

# THE PENGUIN NEW WRITING



EDITED BY  
**JOHN LEHMANN**





THE PENGUIN  
NEW WRITING

35

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## About the new contributors

VITALIANO BRANCATI was born in Pachino, Sicily, in 1907. He has a considerable reputation in Italy as a novelist and playwright, and he has just completed a new long novel, *Il Gallo Non Ha Cantato*. The story printed in this number of *Penguin New Writing* originally appeared in the Italian magazine *Aretusa*, and a film based on it, *Anni Difficili*, was shown at the Venice Festival this year.

MERVYN JONES-EVANS was born in Hampshire in 1922 and educated at Bryanston. He has worked in a London publishing firm, and now lives in Norfolk. He has contributed to *Horizon* and has just completed a first novel.

RONALD BOTTRALL was born in Cornwall in 1906, educated at Redruth County School and Pembroke College, Cambridge (Foundress' Scholar). He was a professor of English Language and Literature at Raffles College, Singapore, 1933-37, and Assistant Director and Professor of English at The British Institute, Florence until 1938. During the war he worked for the Air Ministry, and is now with the British Council in Rome. He has published several volumes of verse, and has another in preparation.

LEWIS THOMPSON is 39 years old. He was born in London, but has spent part of his life in India. He began to publish his work in 1947.

LINDEN HUDDLESTONE was born in 1924, and educated at Mercers School and London University. During the war he served in the Royal Navy, first as an Air Mechanic (Electrical), then as Instructor Lieutenant attached to the Royal Marines. He is married, and works as a schoolmaster in a London grammar school. This is the first full-length critical study he has had published.

JOHN ALDRIDGE is a young American author who graduated in 1946 from the University (Berkeley) where he edited the *Occident*. He is now living and writing in Vermont, and has nearly completed a new book. The article printed here first appeared in a slightly shorter version, in *Harper's Magazine* in America.



## FOREWORD

In this thirty-fifth number, the habitual reader of *Penguin New Writing* will observe that we have discontinued a section which, in one form or another, has been a feature of each issue almost from our start eight years ago: before it was called *The Living Moment* it was *Report on Today*, and before that it was *The Way We Live Now*, a series of specially commissioned reportage impressions of changing life in wartime which took their place among a number of other contributions with a topical slant – such as the famous *Shaving Through the Blitz*. An extraordinarily large number of authors of reputation and distinction have during these eight years made their appearance in this section: V. S. Pritchett, Louis MacNeice, Rosamond Lehmann, Christopher Isherwood, William Sansom and Alun Lewis are only a few of them, picked out almost at random. Among those contributors who were less well known at the time, many have since made their names, and many of the pieces by writers known and unknown, outstanding for some particular quality of freshness or sincerity, have been reprinted again and again and in several languages.

With such a history of success and interest behind it, it might seem a peculiarly freakish editorial decision to discontinue *The Living Moment*, and deprive young writers of one of the few remaining places where they can show their form. The unfortunate truth, however, is that contributions appropriate to this section have gradually been becoming a smaller and smaller proportion of the MSS. that reach us; and it would be straining optimism (or perhaps pessimism) to believe that a turn for the worse in international affairs will bring them tumbling in again. It would be interesting to try to account for the change, but it would take more room than a Foreword. Perhaps we have all had enough of the moment we live in for a while? Whatever the reasons, the fact remains; but though *The Living Moment*

disappears as a feature, contributions which would have been suitable for it will still be welcomed and published among other stories. Meanwhile, we shall use the space to give ourselves greater freedom in publishing unusually long articles or stories, such as *An Approach to Dylan Thomas* and *The Old Man with the Top-Boots* in this number, without breaking them into instalments.

JOHN LEHMANN

# THE PENGUIN NEW WRITING

∞ 35 ∞

L. A. G. STRONG

*PRAY FOR HER*

The milkman whistled his way up the convent drive. Then he remembered, and stopped guiltily. The last twenty yards he walked as silently as he could, and winced at the loud jangle of the bell.

And Sister Francesca, who usually came rattling and rustling to answer, with her loud cheerful voice and her jokes, Sister Francesca came like a poor fat ghost, pale, blotchy, and red-eyed, with never a word.

The young milkman swallowed. Such naked grief embarrassed him. He knew he should ask; he wanted to ask; but he could hardly force out the words.

‘How – how is ...’

He always found it difficult to get his tongue round ‘Reverend Mother.’ The fat nun’s eyes spilled over.

‘Worse, God help us all. She’s terrible bad. Unconscious.’

‘I – I’m sorry—’

‘There’s nothing we can do, only pray.’ She was talking more to herself than to him. ‘Pray.’ Her voice rang out, harsh with grief. A sudden pathetic resolution showed in her face. ‘Yes. We must pray,’ she said defiantly. ‘Pray, and pray. Do you pray for her, too,’ she added, with a touch of her old imperiousness.

He nodded, red, miserable, anxious to get away. The old nun stood, with bleared eyes that no longer took stock of him. Her lips moved: she was bludgeoned with sorrow. Abruptly, like an animal, she turned and left him. He escaped

thankfully, fleeing from her grief, from the whole stricken place.

Sister Francesca, after leaving the tray of bottles on a stout shelf in the larder, waddled her way back through the high, clear hall, with the polished parquet floor and the white walls. Two novices were busy with dusters, one tall and graceful, the other a solid country girl. Absorbed though she was, Sister Francesca gave them a sharp glance, to see if they were properly grieved.

They were talking in low tones, and broke off as she came. The fat nun didn't like that. She felt everyone should be flattened out, as she was. There should be no life in them, no thought but of the terrible calamity that overhung them all. She wanted to rebuke them, but could find no words. Her eyes and an inarticulate murmur told her thought. They drew together, and waited till she was gone.

Theresa, the tall one, sighed.

'Poor Sister Francesca. She is taking it very hard.'

'She'll see that everyone else takes it hard,' said Mary, the commonsense country girl.

'It will be the end of her, if—' Theresa stood straight. 'I can't believe it,' she said, on a breath. 'Reverend Mother — she's always so sure, so safe. As if nothing could touch her. I would have said she had the keys of all things in her keeping. How can a mere sickness ...?'

She broke off, staring at the incomprehensible. Mary nodded.

'I know,' she said. 'It makes you feel nothing's safe.'

'Not even here.' Theresa turned wide eyes on her. The lids were faintly pink. 'I don't know what I shall do without her. I feel frightened. For the first time since I came.'

'She may get better,' the country girl said doggedly.

'Yes. We must pray. Sister Francesca is right. Still ...'

'Still what?'

Mary adored Theresa, looked up to her, marvelled at her slender white hands, her fine bones, her pale skin: wanted always to know what she thought, and strove to understand it.



‘Still –’ Theresa’s eyes had grown suddenly dark. ‘Don’t you think God has made up His mind? Either He is going to take her, or He will leave her with us. Is it not perhaps wrong, presumptuous, that we should try to influence Him? How do we know what is best for Reverend Mother?’

Mary was shocked and startled. Her practical mind saw the point of view, but she opposed it with stubborn adherence to what she had been taught. So much of life was like that, for Mary. The only hope was to hold on tight to the teaching of authority.

‘We can only ask for what we want,’ she said, ‘and leave it to Him whether He will give it to us.’

‘Yes. We have to fight, always. There is no peace. Not even here.’

Theresa stood looking out of the high arched window. She was still for several seconds. Then a footstep sounded, and a familiar wheezing breath, and the Chaplain appeared. A plump, shabby man in his middle sixties, wise, shrewd, experienced, with a gleam that came quickly into his eye, he was a type, but a good type; a comfortable Irish priest, who teased his charges and joked with them, and seemed to them, often, more concerned with the health of their bodies than of their souls. He would break silence after a confession, when the penitent waited breathless and ashamed, and ask her did she eat enough. Theresa’s pallor and the delicate blue shadows under her eyes seemed to occupy him more than her spiritual problems. He was specially fond of Theresa, and she of him.

‘Ah, children,’ he started to say, but the voice died in his throat.

At once Theresa started towards him.

‘How is she, Father?’

He shrugged, coughed, and spread his thick fingers.

‘She is in God’s hands, child. We must pray for her.’

‘Yes.’ She was looking past him. ‘Though no one is more ready for Heaven.’

He stopped, and looked at her. Reverend Mother’s illness

had made a shocking change in him. His jowl was not properly shaved: he sagged: the pouches were heavy under his eyes.

‘I have checked you for pride before, my child.’

Startled, she flushed.

‘Pride, Father?’

‘Premature resignation. What else is that but pride?’ He paused, wheezing. ‘We are here to fight. We may only give up when we have done all we can. All we are bidden to do. I have told you many times, it is a sin to give up. If it is a sin on your own account, it is worse on another’s.’

Seeing her downcast, he put out a hand and patted her arm.

‘A doctor’s business is to keep his patient alive, sinner or saint. We have to pray for her. It is Our Lord’s bidding. I don’t wonder if you’re bewildered, child. Sure, I’m bewildered meself.’

She looked up, with a quick smile. To her, his words were not inconsequent.

‘Yes.’ He pulled himself out of a heavy dream, and rolled his eyes at both girls. ‘We must pray.’

He stood for a couple of seconds more, then shuffled off. The hall seemed to contract after he had gone. Sparrows were squabbling in a bush outside. A patch of sunlight on the floor dimmed, then shone bright again.

The old man’s grief reached Theresa in a way that nothing else had done. The calamity before which she had felt apathetic and powerless now touched her almost with panic. Yes, Father Hennessy was right, of course; it was her pride, a fastidious refusal to ask life to change, an unwillingness to admit that anything it did could put her out. She could see, for a moment at least, how wicked it was – especially when it was Reverend Mother’s life that was at stake. Yes, yes, yes. She must pray. They must all pray.

That afternoon and almost all that night there rose from the convent an agony and power of prayer. Vibrant, quivering upwards like heat in summer air, reiterating with fanatical persistence its demand, it made an urgent pattern with

many strands, from the coarse blubbered cry of Sister Francesca, the dogged entreaty of the novice Mary, the terror-sharpened pleas of those who feared to be lost if their Mother were taken from them, to the white, unwavering call Theresa's will sent up, a slender column, a flight of passionless arrows, the prayer of one who since she was a child had never asked any concrete thing, and did so now only that she might make herself one of the community from which – was it again her pride? – she always felt apart. Ah, how could one be gentle and submissive, and yet one's true self? How offer that self to God, if it must first be changed out of recognition?

The rising pattern of prayer, so strong and steady at first, weakened and dwindled as the hours dragged by. Weariness fell on the suppliants one by one, till at last only four still prayed. Theresa was one of these, but her prayer was changed now. It was as if she had raised a vertical ray of light, passed freely up and down it, was everywhere in it, from its base to the utmost tenuous fingering of its beam. When at last she woke, she had no memory of falling asleep, and knew only that something had happened that made a harmony of time and many great perplexities, and that, though she could not remember what it was, its effect would be with her always.

And then, soon after ten o'clock in the morning, their prayers were answered. Reverend Mother had for some time had a better colour, her breathing and her pulse were stronger. Suddenly, without warning, she came out of her death-like trance; opened her eyes; and was herself. Weak, yes, having come from very far away, but her own self.

The doctor was astonished. 'It is a miracle,' he said: and the old Chaplain, shuffling off to tell them all, his eyes blurred with happy tears, bumped into a nun at the turn of the passage, and did not stop to apologise.

'My children, my children! Your prayers have been answered. God has heard you. Our dear Reverend Mother is restored to us.'

There was a murmuring, a soft crying. They were so tired, so worn out with prayer and sorrow, they could not make much response. It was Theresa who asked the first pointed question.

‘How is she, Father? Will she be the same?’

‘The doctor says she is perfectly clear. There should be no permanent damage, no, none at all. She will need to be careful, of course—’

– ‘of course!’ they all cried, like a flock of birds.

– ‘we must all take great care of her, and see that she does not give herself too freely, spend her energies, wear herself out—’

‘That will be hard,’ said Sister Francesca. ‘She always gives too much of herself.’

‘Ah well, we must all be in a conspiracy’ – his eye twinkled round on them – ‘a conspiracy,’ he repeated, savouring the word, ‘to save her from herself, to keep her from doing too much.’

‘But,’ Theresa persisted, ‘she will be herself? She will be unimpaired?’

‘Yes, child, yes, by God’s grace. There will be no damage.’

But there was: worse damage than any of them could have imagined. Whatever else Reverend Mother had brought back from that long journey, she had left behind the most precious thing of all. She had lost her faith.

\*

When first she spoke of this, quick looks were exchanged between those in the room. She is not as well as we thought, the looks said: and the looks and the nods were so stupid, so wide of the fact, that the patient could have cried out. No need to distress them, she thought with quiet weariness. They would know soon enough. They would have to know.

For a day or two more they indulged her; but, when she said it again, calmly and with certainty, they had to take notice.

‘She seems sure in herself! She spoke clearly of other things.’



'I know. I know. But ...!'

'It must be a lingering effect of the illness. It will wear off.'

But there was no sign of it wearing off: and the worried nuns at last consulted Father Hennessy. The Chaplain blinked. For a minute or two he did not seem to take it in.

'What's that ye say? What's that ye say? Nonsense.' He shuffled down the corridor, waving them away with a coarse red hand. 'Lost her faith! let me tell ye —' he turned and glared. 'It'd be well for ye if ye had a half the faith she has. Or the quarter.' A great snort came from his nostrils. 'Such nonsense!'

They stopped, spreading helpless hands.

'Ask her yourself, Father.'

'I will, and shame the pack of ye!'

He went puffing along, mounted the stair, hand on the banister, and blundered into the sickroom.

'What's this that they're saying about ye?'

She looked at him, calm and beautiful. Her voice seemed to come from a distance.

'I don't know. If it's what I guess it is—'

'They say ye have lost your faith!'

She nodded. The nod hit him harder than a spate of words. His face grew red.

'But ...'

He waddled round, pulled a chair to the bedside, and sat down.

'Listen to me now. You're exhausted. No. Don't say a word. Wait till I'm done. The experience ye have been through, the — the escape — has weakened ye, taken toll of ye. Ye have no vitality left.' He sat up, a hand on each knee, relieved and pleased at finding the word. 'No vitality. No go left in ye; nothing positive. And so, in your weakness, your present weakness, for, thank God, it won't last long — in your weakness, it seems that your faith has gone.'

'It has gone, Father. Completely.'

There was a silence, broken only by the old man's wheezing breath.

'But - how could it? My child! faith - built up over a lifetime of experience: that doesn't vanish in a night.'

'It has vanished.'

'Tell me, my child. Explain.'

'There is nothing to explain. I went a long journey. I - it may be fancy, but I seem to remember ... stronger than a dream. I was near the end of the journey, nearing home, when I was held back. Something, like an iron band, round my breast. I could not go on.' She was silent for a few seconds. 'When I awoke, nothing mattered. Nothing had any meaning.'

Something in her words made the priest's heart sink. He expostulated against it.

'A depression, my child. A temporary trial. And you are not yourself. I can see that. Ye must wait till ye're stronger. I will pray for ye.'

She shook her head, and stared away out of the window as Father Hennessy, wheezing painfully, rose from the chair, kneeled by the bed, and prayed. The words that meant so much, her affection for the old man, the past, the present, the future; all was dead. There was no grief, no dismay. Nothing. Nothing at all.

\*

Ten days passed before Father Hennessy raised the subject again. Reverend Mother's serene beauty was coming back to her, but there was a new expression in her eyes, or a lack of expression. The steadfast life, the strength and inner authority that had made her a beloved ruler, were gone. The personality was still there, but it had withdrawn, far out of reach. The stillness was beyond even the stillness of resignation. Resignation meant a decision, an acceptance of one thing in place of another. This was motionless, and void.

She looked up as the priest came into the room, and her lips faintly smiled. He was so transparent. His resolve, his embarrassment, made themselves felt before he had shut the door behind him. He rubbed his hands and spoke energetically of other things, of the fine sunny morning, of the promise

of a good crop of apples, of the litter of spaniel puppies in the house next door to the presbytery. Then he sat down, hands on knees, and looked at her under his ragged brows. He really would have to be told of them, she thought. They were sprouting madly. If he were thin, they would make him look like a prawn. There was hair in his ears, too, in his nostrils, and odd hairs sticking out of his cheeks, above the range of the razor.

‘And ye’re feeling better? Really better?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Better in yourself?’

‘Whatever that may mean.’ A smile took away the hardness of the response.

‘And those ... nightmares ... those delusions? They are gone too?’

‘No. Father: you will have to face it. I have no longer any belief in God or in His saints. My faith has completely gone.’

He began to get red, to stare, and to breathe so hard she feared he would have a seizure. But, when he spoke, instead of an outburst of wrath came a small, puzzled voice.

‘I don’t understand. Faith is the centre of the universe, the heart of life. There is no life without it. *How* can the centre of life be taken away? And from you, of all people?’

‘I don’t know. All I know is that it has gone. Don’t ask me to explain. The centre *has* gone. Nothing matters any more. When you all brought me back ...’

She broke off. He leaned forward, painfully intent now, his eyes on her quiet profile.

‘Yes? Yes? Go on, my child.’

‘That would be a graceless thing to say, an ungrateful thing. If I remember anything at all ...’ She turned her head to him. ‘No. There is really nothing I can say. When I came back, there was no meaning left. Nothing mattered.’

‘Ye say we brought ye back. We tried. We prayed with all our might.’

He waited, challenging her to comment. She said nothing.

‘Now, child,’ he scolded her. ‘Ye know as well as I it was

our duty. And our desire. We had to pray that ye would be spared to us.'

'And this happened.'

'We prayed to have ye back, restored. We have only the half of our desire. You are not yet restored.'

'I am perfectly well. I am in my senses.'

'Indeed and begod ye are not!' he shouted, the peasant in him coming to the top. 'Ye are not in your right mind, or ye *could* not lose your faith.'

She was silent for a few seconds, looking at the ceiling.

'I would have said that, perhaps,' she said, 'a short time ago.'

'I don't know what to do with ye.' He shook his big head so hard that his cheeks wobbled. 'I don't know what to do with ye at all.'

As he made for the door, she checked him.

'Father. Don't just go away and hope I will change. I shall soon be up and about now, and we must plan.'

'Plan?'

'Naturally. I cannot remain here. You know that. Face it, Father. I have to.' Then, as he ducked his head and plunged for the door, like a bull worried by flies, she added, 'Don't be cross with me.'

'Cross with ye! Now how in the wide earth would I be cross with ye. Me - me poor child, I...'

His voice quavered, and he hurried out of the room.

\*

The news of what had happened had gone round the convent now, and caused a paralysing consternation. Most of the nuns could not understand it. All persisted in looking on it as a temporary misfortune, a symptom of illness. They said this to the Chaplain, and, for the very reason that he had said so himself, the old man became angry and barked at them. Indeed, the chief result seemed to be a wave of ill-temper which swept through the whole place. Sister Francesca especially suffered from it: the novices were roundly scolded for all kinds of shortcomings, real and imagined. Only



Theresa seemed unaffected. Dispassionately she considered what had happened, in an endeavour to see what it meant, what was its place in the scheme of things. Theresa's faith, less omnivorous than others', was the more unshakable because it was less concerned with material things. She could feel indulgent towards the images and paraphernalia which meant so much to the rest. For her, they belonged to the nursery department. She did not need them; they did not help her to contemplate what they represented.

Perhaps because of this, Theresa's chief feeling was curiosity to know just what had befallen her beloved Reverend Mother; how it could have happened; what it was like to lose your faith; what, if anything, was left? She longed to see the invalid, and hoped, in spite of all that was said, that she might do so before Reverend Mother went away for 'the long rest' Sister Francesca had spoken about. For, very soon, the older nuns started to pretend that nothing was the matter. They were trying to cover up the loss of faith, which in the first shock and panic they had admitted.

'They don't trust us,' Theresa said to Mary. 'They're afraid we might lose our own faith.'

'Well now!' Mary said, with a semblance of indignation: and Theresa felt her looking closely, for Mary, as she knew, much as she admired her, had often feared her ideas and thought she came near to heresy. Mary would have liked to ask Theresa what she felt about the misfortune to Reverend Mother, and how it was affecting her; but she hesitated. One did not ask Theresa about herself. Either she told one, or one went without.

\*

Next time Father Hennessy went in to see Reverend Mother, he had everything arranged. But he still waited for the miracle. He greeted the patient heartily: puffed out a few commonplaces: then, 'Well?' he said, shambling over towards the window, and looking out.

'You know the answer.'

'Tchah!' He was looking at the milkman coming up the

drive. 'Fella's late,' he muttered to himself. 'I hoped ye had come to your senses.'

'No,' she said. 'I must leave here.'

'What about all these children? They worship ye. You're the sun and the moon in the sky to them.'

'It's very wrong.' Her brow clouded. 'I always told them so. God is all-sufficient for them.'

'Aah, have sense, woman. Sure we all need humanity.' He had noted, with secret joy, that she still spoke of God as a fact. 'You're their teacher. This change of yours will hurt them. Hurt their faith, maybe.'

'A faith as easily hurt as that is not worth much. Not that I am a fit judge. Look what has happened to mine. I'm in no position to teach.'

He screwed up his baggy eyelids at her.

'Maybe ye have to learn. Maybe that's the sense of what's happened ye. The world is to be your teacher.'

She sighed. 'I used to tell them there is neither teaching nor learning without God.'

'No more there is. God's always the teacher. But -- maybe that's what ye have to prove. Aye. That's it. Ye'll come back to us.'

'Meanwhile, what am I to do? I'm forty-one.'

He looked at her, his chin sinking into two bristling rolls of flesh.

'I've a friend, a doctor. He wants a secretary. Just such a woman as yourself.'

'Secretary? I wonder. I—'

'Ye've had medical training. Nursing. Ye'll be ideal for the man.'

'Is he a good Catholic?'

The priest chuckled. 'He is not. It's from the heretics ye have to learn. Even if they only send ye back to us in disgust.'

She smiled. 'I thought you said there was no teaching without God?'

'God can choose His own instruments, without any help from the likes of you and me.'

'Father.' She sat upright, looking at him. 'You do take this seriously? You don't just think I'm distraught?'

'Oh, faith, I never saw ye calmer. Ye've scared me often, in the past, ye seemed so sure of yourself.' He grinned. 'Ye're worse than ever, now.'

'Sure of myself? How can you say such a thing to me?'

'Now don't go taking me up wrong. I mean no more than I said. I always took ye to know your own mind, and I'm convinced ye know it now. I'm believing ye, don't ye see?' His voice had risen almost to a shout. 'I'm believing ye, where another wouldn't. Instead of cosseting ye and making out all ye needed was a tonic. What more do ye want me to do?'

Her eyes moistened. 'You are good and kind, as always. You will look after them for me, won't you?'

'Oh, faith, I will. A headstrong lot. What'll they be like, without yourself to keep them in order!'

They went off into details after that, details and material arrangements, until the old priest left her.

\*

Theresa's hope was fulfilled the day before Reverend Mother went away from the convent. The novice was sent for, and came confidently into the room. For a few moments neither woman spoke.

'You know that I am going away?'

'Yes, Reverend Mother. I am very sorry.'

'You know why?'

'Yes, Reverend Mother.'

'You must not call me that any more.' She paused. 'I want you to promise me something.'

Theresa lifted her head. Her lips parted.

'I want you to promise that you will not let this make any difference to your own belief.'

'That is not a thing I could promise. But - it will not.'

The older woman nodded. 'It would make my burden heavier if I felt I had hurt others.'

'Is your burden heavy?' The girl leaned forward. 'I have

wondered how it felt. I cannot imagine losing my faith. There would be nothing left.'

'There is nothing left. But be on your guard. Do you think I could ever have imagined losing mine?'

'It isn't fair,' Theresa cried suddenly. 'There used to be persecutions, burnings – but at least people knew where they were. But if the centre of everything can be taken away without warning ... if there is no certainty at all ...'

Her eyes had left the Reverend Mother: she was staring at the wall. As her voice trailed off, she looked back wonderingly, and the older woman saw that her eyes were dark with pain.

'Do not ask me for counsel, child. I have no help for you. I can only recall you to what you said – that you cannot imagine losing your faith.'

'But, Reverend Mother – it's as if a trick had been played on you. You haven't lost your faith. It was stolen from you while you were asleep.'

The handsome face softened.

'It is kind of you to say that to me, child: but—'

'That is the truth. I saw it as I spoke. To lose your faith, you must feel doubt, and wonder. You had no doubt. When the illness took you, your faith was strong, and you were not afraid. When you awoke, it was gone. That is not losing your faith.'

'The result is the same. It has gone. There is no meaning left in anything.'

'I believe it will come back.' Theresa looked steadfastly at her. 'I believe you will come back to us.'

'Perhaps. I hope so.'

The tone tried to turn what the girl had said into a childish wish, an affirmation of loyalty: but Theresa did not mind. It made the parting easier for them both.

\*

Theresa was not unhappy after their short talk, nor next afternoon, when all the rest were weeping, as their Mother, dressed in the clothes of the outer world, was driven down

the drive and out through the gates. Somehow Theresa had managed to be there, in the hall, and somehow Father Hennessy found her beside him, as he stood looking after the woman whom for twelve years he had known better than he knew anyone.

He gave a little grunt as he saw Theresa, but did not speak. The novice hesitated, then came nearer to him. He was biting his thumbnail.

'She will feel better now,' she said softly.

He turned and stared at her, sticking out his lower lip like a great monkey.

'Better - now?'

'Yes. Here, everything reminded her of what she had lost. Out there, it won't seem so bad.'

'Oh. Ah. Maybe.' He broke off, and shook his head. 'We must pray for her, child. We must pray for her.'



# NORMAN NICHOLSON

## TWO POEMS

### I

#### FIVE MINUTES

'I'm having five minutes,' he said,  
Fitting the shelter of the cobble wall  
Over his shoulders like a cape. His head  
Was wrapped in a cap as green  
As the lichened stone he sat on. The winter wind  
Whined in the ashes like a saw,  
And thorn and briar shook their red  
Badges of hip and haw;  
The fields were white with smoke of blowing lime;  
Rusty iron brackets of sorrel stood  
In grass grey as the whiskers round an old dog's nose.  
'Just five minutes,' he said;  
And the next day I heard that he was dead,  
Having five minutes to the end of time.

### II

#### GATHERING STICKS ON SUNDAY

If the man in the moon  
Gazing at the waning earth, watches  
How the frayed edge of the sunset catches  
Thimbles and nodules of rock,  
Hachureing distinct with threads of shadow  
All that is hammered fiat in the earth's brass noon;

And if he sees,  
New in the level light, like pock-  
marks on a face, dark craters,  
The size of acorn cups, or scars  
Vast as his own dried oceans, then  
He'll know that soon  
The living world of men  
Will take a lunar look, as dead as slag,  
And moon and earth will stare at one another  
Like the cold, yellow skulls of child and mother.

## MERVYN JONES-EVANS

### *THE SILVER DISH*

Mrs Blake, when not otherwise engaged, gave all her attention to her only son. He absorbed both her time and her interest. Richard, a plump but delicate boy with fair hair and brown eyes, a nervous smile, a somewhat lonely air, who lived in a world of his own creation, looked upon her as the one comprehensible link with that world of adults which filled him with apprehension and alarm. It is true that in this world of adults he sought friendship in the society of Mrs Adams the cook and Effie the parlourmaid, and it is also true that they did, in some way, give him a little of what he needed. But their society was an almost forbidden pleasure, for although his mother did not object to his going below stairs (it often made things easier when he did), she could not be said to encourage it. She had many good reasons for this. He might pick up Effie's accent, or worse still, develop a steadier, a more easily understood relationship with them than with her. She thought that if she allowed him to run to the kitchen too frequently that he might make it a habit, that he would go to Mrs Adams rather than come to his mother when he felt particularly in need of companionship and help. Therefore, although she employed a nurse – Mrs Blake understood that he never went to *her* for companionship – she rarely spent a morning without going upstairs to spend an hour with him or an afternoon without joining him when Miss Barratt took him for a walk. Whether or no the nurse minded meant nothing to her. She allowed the woman to think that she had her confidence, but all the same, in order to make sure, she let it be understood that she kept her eye on things even though she knew very well that the nursery was not under her immediate management, that from the nurse's point of view she had no right to interfere. But Mrs

Blake seldom interfered, and when she did it was only with the greatest of tact. If she were uneasy about the boy's health she consulted the nurse as if seeking a superior opinion; she would put her anxious inquiry into a discreet question, thus gaining what she wanted with the minimum of trouble and without having to exercise the maximum of charm. If it had not been for Mr Blake – a burly, affectionate but totally insensitive, brusque business man – she would have dispensed with Miss Barratt altogether. She had gone as far as suggesting it only to be told that it was impossible, that while they had the money there was no need to do without the little luxuries – Miss Barratt was one of them – that made life freer and easier for them both. Secretly, Miss Barratt added to his pride; the more servants he had the better, and Miss Barratt along with Mrs Adams, Effie and the gardener, enabled him to say in answer to questions concerning the servant problem that he managed wonderfully on a staff of four. And, moreover, since they had moved into their new house – a large, ivy-covered, red-brick house with towers, turrets, sham battlements and a garden hidden from the main road by pines, clumps of rhododendrons, lilac and straggly buddleia bushes – it was only right that they should keep all the servants they could afford to bolster up their social position. And such a position was of the greatest importance to Reginald Blake, although he suspected that his wife did not share his view as wholeheartedly as she might. But then he did not realize that Ruth would have been happier, far happier, with a smaller place, one servant and her child to herself.

Yet Ruth had never told him this because she did not wish to appear ungrateful, to stand in his way, to act as a drag. And since she was devoted to him and greatly respected his ambition, she put up with Miss Barratt, the nursery world upstairs, and reconciled herself to the unpleasant fact that she was only to know her son second-hand.

Richard was ever present in her mind, and having nothing else to do or think about she spent her time imagining what

she would do if she had him to herself always. Many a morning, idle and bored, with nothing to occupy her mind but the crossword puzzle in *The Times*, she waited for the moment when she could visit her son upstairs. She read the paper, then re-read it, wrote unnecessary letters to old, half-forgotten friends who rarely answered, attempted to knit, searched the shelves of the glass-fronted bookcase with its leather-bound sets of Thackeray, Dickens, Prescott and Macaulay for something to compel her interest; then, desperate with boredom, she would ring a quarter of an hour too early for her morning coffee, and having finished it, she felt that she was at last free for an hour with Richard.

Every morning it was the same. Each day on waking she looked forward to an hour before lunch, to an hour after tea and to the possibility of a walk with her son. There were things that relieved her of her maternal obsession; friends, for instance, a morning's shopping, or a game of bridge twice a week. But even then, at the back of her mind, there lay the unsatisfied yearning for the company of her son. But as her husband directed otherwise – and husbands were more often than not in the right – she allowed him to have his own way. He knew what he was doing, she told herself; he worked hard in his office in the interests of them all and she felt that it was her duty to respect his wishes as far as possible with the management of his own house. She reminded herself that she wasn't to pamper or make too much fuss of the boy. For he was in danger of being spoilt as it was; now that his father had taken to giving him so many toys. The cupboard in the day nursery was stuffed with boxes of electric trains, Meccano sets, model ships and miniature soldiers. But he never played with them. Only occasionally, when the boy was bored, they were taken out, looked at, then packed carefully away again. It was clear that he had too many to know what to do with them all. But she never asked herself why it was that her son was reluctant to touch them. She never realized that he was afraid of his father, that he disliked his presence and that he wanted to be left alone, lost in his world which



he had peopled with fascinating characters of his own creation.

When it came to toys Richard was not interested in trains from Bassett Lowke or Meccano sets from Regent Street shops. What he really wanted if the truth were known, and he concealed it from all of them, was a doll's house, a miniature tea-service and some of those diminutive sets of period armchairs, dining-room tables and bedroom suites which he had always longed, but never dared, to examine when his parents took him shopping. Once, and once only, he had told Miss Barratt how nice they were, but she had turned on him mockingly with 'little boys shouldn't be interested in such things; they're only for girls, Richard,' and he had never mentioned his interest in them again. They were, he perceived at once, forbidden from the outset. However, they were what he wanted most. All the other things, the soldiers, the cranes and the model guns, were meaningless to him.

But Ruth Blake neither understood nor studied the tastes of her son; she was content just to be with him. It did not even strike her that he was hypersensitive, already set on the wrong path by sheer force of circumstances, and that, it must have been instinctive in one so young, he despised his father. What she failed to notice, perhaps to her own detriment, was that above all things it was her continual presence, her ever-present affection he needed and looked for, and that he was hurt if it was not forthcoming. Had she been able to see what the trouble was and gone out of her way to remedy it, she would have known that there was no further need of Miss Barratt, no matter what her husband might have to say, and that for the next ten years at least her own happiness was assured as well as her son's. But Ruth Blake lacked intuition; she was weak; the maternal instinct while always in the right place was timid; temerity had no place in her character. Richard, afraid to confess his need for his mother, kept silent about himself but nurtured his secret, hiding it from both Miss Barratt and his father although he tried desperately to let his mother see how much he wanted her.

And so while Mrs Blake and her son were kept apart through her own lack of courage, her husband made it more difficult for them to come closer together because of his strong belief in his own methods and his own way of life. He did not understand his son and he only saw what he wanted to see. Richard was a boy, it therefore followed that he would be good at games, enjoy his Meccano and model trains, and that he would end up like his father, a first-class golfer and a successful business man, soldier, barrister, engineer or whatever it was that he decided to be. After all, Mr Blake might well have asked himself, what else were sons for?

What Richard's father did not notice was the strange, distant, unsympathetic look in the child's eye; the beautiful but weak smile; the pride in the boy's bearing and the disdainful coolness with which on occasion he treated him. He failed to perceive, on top of everything else, that his son loathed him and always removed himself at the earliest, the politest moment possible; that when his father called him 'old chap,' 'Dick, old man,' he looked embarrassed and ashamed. On one occasion, blushing with distaste, he had reproved his father in a gentle whisper. 'Please,' he had said with unusual dignity, 'my name is Richard.'

His father had thought it odd, indeed somewhat priggish, but since he did not know what lay at the back of it, he dismissed it as childish and continued to call the boy 'old chap' and 'old man', not realizing that in doing so he only helped to increase the estrangement. And the boy himself did not know what it was about his father that upset him. He only felt that his father's manner was not what he wanted; not what he approved of, and that for all his seven years, reason played no role in his dislikes and affections.

His mother felt something of this but did not go into it. She did not even think about it although, deep down, somewhere or other, she knew faintly what it implied.

Then one day Mrs Blake did understand and the situation became absolutely clear to her, allowing her to see how lucky she had been in having only kind, good, hopelessly unsympa-

thetic Miss Barratt between her and her son. It might have been worse. But still Miss Barratt could not be dismissed and Mrs Blake risked every chance of her own domestic happiness in order to give up every possible moment to her son. But how wonderful it was that Richard should want her as much as she wanted *him*!

The moment of revelation had come suddenly; had taken her unawares and made her gasp with satisfaction. But this moment did not last long, for shortly after her momentous joy and excitement she found to her amazement that her son's perception with regard to his father was powerfully astute. Her son's instincts were so much finer than her own and once her eyes were opened she saw that as far as the boy was concerned his unconcealed antipathy towards his father was justified, that it was inevitable, deserved. This discovery worried her. Not that Ruth Blake's own feelings towards her husband altered; she was still fond of him and she still admired his ambition, his kindness and his generosity. But the real change came when she began to sympathize with her son. For herself her husband would do; for Richard he was nowhere near good enough. It was here that Mrs Blake showed her good sense.

The revelation, which was to alter her life, came at an inopportune moment as such revelations often do. It came to her in the middle of a dinner party. Mr Blake, upholding his social position, had decided to give a dinner for a number of his business associates. It was, as he had described it, to be a 'full dress affair.' Preparations had started a full week ahead, and the house had taken on an air of bustle and activity. Mrs Blake found something to occupy her at last; while in the kitchen, despite the extra work, Mrs Adams, assisted by Effie, gave herself up to preparing various dishes in a state of excited anticipation. The excitement that had been aroused was excusable, for in this red-brick, crenellated house a party was an event, and this one in particular was to be on a scale that well suited the house.

Richard, although confined to the nursery, was fully aware

of what was taking place. The excitement had penetrated to his room and he too had become imbued with the same sense of expectancy. Cut off as he was, he joined in, and as the day itself approached, the forthcoming dinner party occupied his whole interest. He questioned everyone about it. Miss Barratt was irritated at having to give him so many details, while his mother encouraged his enthusiasm because of the amusement it gave her. He even questioned his father, forgetting his aversion in doing so. And when the day arrived his mother felt that he should have some share in it, and as he was too young to take any active part she arranged with Miss Barratt that he should be allowed to see the dining-room. Such things, she knew, appealed to him strongly.

That evening, before being put to bed, the nurse brought the child downstairs. The room had been rearranged. An extra leaf had been put in the extended table; cutlery, silver and glass shone on the freshly polished surface. White flowers had been arranged in cut-glass bowls, and pink shaded candles, napkins twisted into shapes and an epergne filled with fruit completed the decoration.

Richard looked at the transformation with surprise and fascination. As he stood in the doorway looking at the decorated table his mother and father joined him to watch his reactions.

‘Well, Dick old boy,’ his father said, placing a heavy hand on his small son’s shoulder. ‘What do you make of it?’

For a moment the boy said nothing. His father’s unexpected presence at once killed the pleasure which the scene had given him. He edged away from his father, disengaged his hand from Miss Barratt’s, and walked further into the room as if wanting to give his father the impression that he wished to see more before giving his opinion. He raised himself on to his toes as if to see better. And to steady himself he put out a hand towards the table.

‘Steady on, old man, don’t disarrange everything!’ he heard his father warning him. Mr Blake’s voice was less kind,



less friendly; it held the familiar note of rebuke. The boy blushed.

'I think it's lovely,' he said, turning now to his mother, now to Miss Barratt.

His mother saw his anguish and gave him a smile of encouragement that immediately gave him back his self-confidence. But nevertheless he wished his father wasn't there; he worried him, made him feel awkward and shy.

Then the heavy, embossed, over-engraved epergne caught his eye. He looked at the little filigree baskets that hung from the ornamental brackets, at the large silver swan which carried a load of fruit between its wings and at the wide base that seemed to be composed entirely of silver ferns and flowers. He gazed at this old-fashioned piece of table decoration without speaking. He examined the pineapple, the peaches, grapes and oranges; he then studied the chocolates and *petits fours* with which the little baskets were filled. Richard's eyes took in the whole of this absurd, ostentatious Victorian creation. Mrs Blake knew at once, by the expression of his eyes, exactly what he thought of it, but before she could prevent him he had already given them his opinion.

Pointing to the epergne, he said: 'I think that's ugly; it spoils everything.'

Mr Blake looked hurt and surprised. 'What's wrong with it?' he asked, in a noticeably disappointed tone. (It was at moments such as this that Mr Blake also showed himself to be something of a child.) 'I think it's a beautiful piece of work. They can't make things like that these days.'

Miss Barratt tried to save the situation by taking Mr Blake's side. 'Yes, Richard, what is wrong with it? I agree with Mr Blake, it's a magnificent thing.'

Richard didn't answer Miss Barratt. He saw his father frown, then, quite unexpectedly, smile tolerantly.

'Oh, well,' he said, in an attempt to dismiss the subject, 'there's no allowing for taste, is there, Miss Barratt?'

'No, Sir, none at all,' the nurse readily agreed with a smile. She was pleased, for it was not often that Mr Blake addressed

her on matters outside the nursery and her charge. She was flattered that he should have turned to her for confirmation of his own impeccable taste.

The boy looked at Miss Barratt, surprised, then transferred his look to his father. Sharply turning away from Mr Blake he sought his mother's eyes. She made him a signal; she winked quickly and perceptibly shook her head. Richard continued to look at her, puzzled, while she tapped her husband's arm.

'We ought to go and wait in the drawing-room,' she said. 'That is if Richard has seen enough. Have you seen all that you want to see?' she asked, addressing her son kindly. She withheld the burning affection and adoration which she was tempted to put into her voice.

Richard was still staring at her, trying to take in the meaning of her signal.

'Won't you come and say goodnight to me?' he asked, under the impression that he was seeing his mother for the last time that night.

'We'll pop up and see you later on,' his father put in. 'Now I think you had better run along with Miss Barratt. It's late, you know; far too late for you, young man.'

The boy looked at the table again, trying to avoid the epergne. But it was impossible not to see it. There it stood, massive, hideous, dominating the table. Had he been older he would have described it to himself differently, now his dislike of it was only instinctive.

Reluctantly he allowed Miss Barratt to take his hand.

'See you later, old man,' his father said, as the nurse led him from the room. Richard did not answer him. But at the door he turned. 'And you, mother?'

'I'll be up,' she assured him, smiling. 'I shall be up before you're asleep, in ten minutes or so.' She bent down and kissed him.

Upstairs the boy was put to bed at once. Miss Barratt felt that on such an occasion as this she could dispense with her normal duties – those of sitting by the nursery fire, sewing,

mending and darning – and join Mrs Adams in the kitchen below. She too felt that she had a right to join in a part of the festivities. She smoothed the boy's pillow, kissed him, poked the fire and put the tall guard in front of it, switched out the light and told him to go to sleep.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked. ‘Where are you going?’

‘I'm going downstairs,’ she replied. ‘I've things to do, all sorts of jobs.’

‘But mother hasn't been to see me yet,’ he protested.

‘She'll come in when you're asleep, I expect. Now then, turn over. It's late, you know, and you should have been asleep long ago.’ And she left the room softly closing the door behind her.

Mrs Blake didn't come.

Richard lay watching the firelight on the ceiling. Voices rose from the hall. There was a burst of male laughter and footsteps on the stairs. At one point there was whispering outside his door and he distinctly heard his mother's voice. He waited for her to come in but she went along the passage to her own room. A few minutes later she went past again and he heard other footsteps besides hers.

He continued to watch the firelight, his ears alert for any fresh sound. He waited patiently; he knew that the visitors were still arriving by the different noises which reached him, and he knew he must wait a little longer before she came to him. More footsteps went up and down stairs; alien footsteps that didn't belong to his mother or father, Miss Barratt or Mrs Adams.

Then the voices intensified. Overcome by curiosity he crept out of bed and tiptoed along the landing to the top of the stairs. Concealing himself behind the banisters he saw his mother and father with a party of strangers crossing the hall to the dining-room. As they disappeared he seated himself on the top stair in the hope that his mother might come back. Almost immediately Effie passed carrying a tureen of soup. When she returned a few minutes later he called to her in a loud whisper. She looked up.

'Master Richard! you naughty boy. You ought to be asleep.' She said this good-humouredly, as if pretending to be surprised. There was nothing severe about Effie.

'Don't tell Miss Barratt,' he whispered back. 'What are they doing?'

'What do you think?' she replied.

'Is mother coming to see me?' he then asked.

'Not now,' said Effie. 'She's far too busy.'

'Will you tell her to come up?' he pleaded. He felt she was an ally. Indeed, often in the past Effie had been an ally.

'If you go back to bed, I will. But I doubt if she'll come; she can't leave her visitors, can she now?'

'Tell her, please do,' he answered in the hope that his mother would at least know that he still expected her.

'I'll see what I can do. But you go back to bed at once. Go on, go straight back. And mind Miss Barratt doesn't catch you. She'll be very angry if she sees you sitting on the stairs when you should be in bed.'

Richard returned to his room and went back to bed. The firelight flickered on the ceiling and walls and the polished surfaces of the furniture. He waited. Minutes went by. He could hear the voices in the dining-room quite plainly. He listened to the bursts of laughter which every now and then carried through the house; at one point he heard a sound of clapping closely followed by cheering. He was absorbed. Never before had he heard such noises as these.

A little while later he found that he had been asleep. What woke him was the sound of his door closing. Immediately he called out thinking that it was his mother.

The door opened again and Miss Barratt put her head in. 'Shush, you ought to be fast asleep,' she said.

'Isn't mother coming?' he asked, disappointed.

'No,' Miss Barratt answered firmly.

'But she promised,' he pleaded, conscious of the fact that he could expect no sympathy from her. 'She promised me she would.'



Miss Barratt came into the room and leant over him. He was fully awake now.

'Are they still eating?' he asked.

'No, not now. They're all in the drawing-room.'

'I expect she'll come soon,' he said. 'I know she will.'

'Maybe she will; turn over and go to sleep, there's a good boy.'

Miss Barratt was anxious to get back to her supper. She smoothed his pillow and left the room with strong injunctions that he should go to sleep at once. She even threatened to be angry if she found him awake when she next came up. But the boy did not feel like sleep; and he was glad that he had woken up, that the party was not over and that there was still time for his mother to appear. When Miss Barratt had gone he again got up and walked silently along the passage to the top of the stairs. Hearing the voices from the drawing-room he crept down, one hand firmly grasping the banisters, until he reached the bend. Here he seated himself, with his eyes fixed on the drawing-room door.

He stayed in this position several minutes listening to the various voices, picking out his father's laugh, and hoping that he might have an opportunity to distinguish his mother's. Presently the door opened making him start. He retreated silently up the stairs until he thought that he was safely out of view. Peering through the banisters he saw that it was again Effie, this time with a tray of dirty coffee cups. He stood up and called to her. She looked up in surprise.

'Did you tell mother?' he asked at once. Before she answered he knew that she hadn't.

'Of course I didn't; I hadn't a chance, Master Richard. Why aren't you in bed? I'll tell Miss Barratt what you're up to; and without a dressing-gown too!'

'Oh Effie, please don't.'

He looked as if he might cry. Effie, aged eighteen, a happy, chubby-cheeked girl with lank straight hair that was cut sharply round her neck so that it just reached the level of the

lobes of her ears, was a kind creature and she liked children; she understood the boy and wanted to help him.

Standing in the hall and looking up at him she saw that he was unhappy, she saw too that he was about to burst into tears. Her heart was touched. Putting her tray down on a table she went up the stairs towards him.

‘What’s wrong, Master Richard?’

‘I’m waiting for mother,’ was all he said. His face had grown round, wrinkled and swollen-looking, and she felt that any second now the tears would come. She knew that she had to prevent them, for she couldn’t bear the sight of a child crying, especially Master Richard.

‘All right,’ she told him quietly. ‘I’ll see what I can do. Now go back to bed and I’ll try and talk to Mrs Blake.’

Back in his room he stood staring into the fire which had died down a little; the bright active flames had given way to glowing red coals. He liked Effie and knew that now she would try to help him. She was so much nicer than Miss Barratt whom he didn’t really care about. She was too brisk and too stern – that is, when his mother wasn’t about. He wouldn’t have said that she was unkind, she wasn’t, it was just that she never seemed friendly enough. She didn’t try to help him. Effie was different; she was kind, gentle, and ready for a game. And thinking of her as a friend he felt that he wanted to give her something – perhaps one of his toy sheep that meant so much to him – so that she might see exactly how much he liked her. But he heard footsteps and jumped back into bed. He recognized them as his father’s and as if to protect himself he pulled the sheets and blankets up to his chin. The door opened and his father came in clumsily and switched on the light as he did so. To Richard it appeared that his father had made his entrance in one explosive gesture.

‘Well, old chap, what’s the matter?’ he asked in a loud, heavy voice. ‘Can’t you sleep?’

Mr Blake sat on the boy’s bed and almost crushed Richard’s legs. The bed creaked as it took the additional weight. As he sat down Richard at once felt his father’s party gaiety.

He brought it into the room with him. He was jovial, expansive, hearty. His starched shirt front swelled out in front of him like the bulging crop of an over-fed cockerel and Richard noticed that he smelt of soap and eau-de-cologne. He was noisy and loud, and had the boy been a few years older, he would have seen that it was all a part of a deliberate heartiness, an assertion (for so it seemed) of his masculinity, his embarrassing self-assurance and conscious mastery of his family and household.

The child looked at his father's red cheeks, bald head and short, well-clipped moustache, and felt overwhelmed by his oppressive presence.

'I thought mother was coming up,' he said pointedly, openly resenting his father.

'I'm afraid that she couldn't get away, old man.'

'But she promised she would.' The boy was growing petulant and his father was at a loss as to how to humour him.

'I shouldn't worry about seeing her to-night. You'll be seeing her to-morrow. She can't leave the others downstairs, can she?'

Richard knew that his father wouldn't help and was angry that Effie hadn't tried hard enough.

'Did Effie send you up?' he asked.

'Yes, she was going to ask your mother, but I stopped her. I thought that I would slip up and have a look at you myself.' His father looked at him for some sign of gratitude, but he saw no trace of it in Richard's face. 'Now then,' he went on hurriedly, 'isn't it time you had some sleep? You've no idea how late it is. Come along now, be a good chap.'

'I don't feel like sleeping,' the boy replied. Then he went on to ask his father a question. 'Did you really like that silver thing in the middle of the dining-room table?'

Mr Blake was momentarily confused. Then he remembered the epergne.

'The fruit dish?' he asked. 'Of course I do; it belonged to my mother.'

Richard remembered his mother's signal and only now understood what she had meant.

'I didn't know that,' he said, allowing a little softness to come into his voice. 'But I don't like it,' he added frankly, 'even if it is made of silver.'

'It has been in my family a long time,' his father said, as if he hadn't heard his son. 'When I was a boy and we lived in London it used to stand on the dining-room sideboard. I think it must have been a wedding-present, I'm not sure. I don't think it's a particularly beautiful thing, but I'm a little bit sentimental. I should hate it if it wasn't there, for it has become a part of me.'

'That makes a difference, doesn't it?' Richard found himself saying. 'I didn't know that. Perhaps I'm wrong.'

The boy knew that he wasn't wrong and he knew that his mother couldn't possibly care for it, but he felt the need for some sort of compromise. Perhaps if he pretended to like it, or were a little less positive about his dislike of it, then his father might prove to be helpful in return. It suddenly occurred to him that though he was always against his father, it might improve the situation if he agreed with him for a change. It was a gamble, but he didn't stand to lose anything by it.

'I'd never seen it before,' he began, cautiously feeling his way. 'Perhaps I shall like it too, in time.' Then giving his father a friendly, affectionate smile, he said: 'You know, it might mean as much to me when I'm older. It would be nice if it did, wouldn't it?'

Mr Blake had been quite right about himself. Despite his bluff heartiness he *was* sentimental, and this suggestion of his son's had absolutely hit its mark. He fell for it. This was new; Richard rarely smiled at him like that and he was charmed by the warmth the boy had unexpectedly shown. Richard saw his father's reaction and flushed. How easy it was! He was surprised that anything could be so simple. Still smiling he said: 'I don't remember granny, but whenever I see that dish I shall always think of her.'

There was something blatantly feminine in his seduction of his father, although Mr Blake had not been aware of it himself. For him it meant that his son was becoming really rather delightful. 'He's growing out of the difficult stage,' he told himself.

A few minutes later he was on his way downstairs to fetch his wife. 'Dick's all right,' he was thinking. 'He'll turn out the right sort. He's nervous, that's all, but he'll get over it. The trouble is that he has too many damned women about him.'

As Ruth Blake hurried up the stairs and along the passage to the nursery she asked herself how it had come about that her husband was so eager for her to see Richard. Usually he would say: 'Don't pamper him, Ruth; surely Miss Barratt can see to him. What do we employ her for but to look after him?'

As she opened the door she heard him call out.

'I'm glad you've come,' he said. 'Daddy didn't want you to come but I made him. I persuaded him to ask you.'

"Made him", Richard? "persuaded him"? What do you mean?"

Richard smiled. 'I was nice to him and he liked it. I told him that I liked his awful silver dish.' He laughed. 'He really does seem to be rather fond of me.'

She was surprised at his frankness and felt that he was trying to make her a fellow conspirator. She smiled. She liked being taken into his confidence.

'Why didn't you come up earlier?' he asked.

'I couldn't get away; I tried to.' She took his hand and looked at him earnestly; she was thinking.

'Do you like Miss Barratt?' she asked suddenly.

He didn't answer at once, he was thinking of what his answer should be, or rather, what his mother wanted it to be.

'She's all right,' he said with deliberate hesitation.

'Would you prefer it, dear, if we had more time together?'

'Of course, Mother'; it would be splendid.'

Mrs Blake felt victorious. Nobody understood the boy but



herself. Life would really begin now. They were plotters, the two of them, but what did it matter as long as they were happy? She saw difficulties ahead, her husband to start with; but there were always difficulties of one sort or another.

But then, why shouldn't Richard handle him? He had been successful but ten minutes earlier. Of course they could do without Miss Barratt! And since the boy was so different from other children – and she was perfectly prepared to admit it – why not treat him differently?

'I must go back now, Richard, I can't stay away any longer. Goodnight, my darling.' She leant over him and kissed him. The touch of her lips on his cheek gave him a feeling of happiness, almost one of security, but more wonderful still, the sensation of having had his own way. Added to this, he sensed that his mother had found herself at last.

Mrs Blake went over to the window, drew back the curtains with their gay pattern of lifebelts, anchors and dancing sailors, opened the window and let in the night air. She made up her mind as she did so that she would talk to her husband about Miss Barratt that night.

'You look wonderful in that dress,' the boy said, as she stood by the door waiting to turn out the light.

She smiled at him. 'You're a marvellous boy and I'm very very fond of you.' Then she said: 'Be nice to your father. Always be kind to him. Do it for my sake. You've no idea how much he appreciates it.' She smiled again and she saw that he had understood. As she went downstairs something told her that she could trust the boy.

# ODYSSEUS ELYTIS

## THE MAD POMEGRANATE-TREE

*Translated from the Greek by Nanos Valaoritis  
and Bernard Spencer*

IN these whitewashed courtyards where the South Wind  
blows

Whistling through arcaded rooms, O tell me  
Is it the mad pomegranate-tree  
That darts into the light scattering her fertile laughter  
With whims and whispers of the wind  
O tell me is it the mad pomegranate-tree  
That shakes with newborn foliage at dawn  
Opening all her colours high with shudders of triumph?

When the naked girls awake in the plains  
Reaping the clovers with their fair hands  
Tossing the depth of their slumber  
O tell me is it this mad pomegranate-tree  
That slips the light in their fresh baskets  
That overflows their names with songs  
Is it the mad pomegranate-tree  
That fights the shadows of the world?

The jealous day adorns herself with seven glowing wings  
Surrounding the eternal sun with a million prisms  
O tell me is it this mad pomegranate-tree  
That grasps a horse's mane with a hundred lashes  
In her runaway race  
Sometimes sad and sometimes grumbling  
O tell me is it the mad pomegranate-tree  
Shouting the dawn of a new hope?

O tell me is it the mad pomegranate-tree  
Rejoicing in the far-away  
Shaking a handkerchief of leaves and fresh fire  
A sea pregnant with a thousand ships  
With waves that run and roll for ever  
Towards untrodden shores, O tell me  
Is it the mad pomegranate-tree  
That creaks her rigging high in the lucid air?

In the grape-blue heights feasting and flaring  
Defiant, dangerous, tell me  
Is it the mad pomegranate-tree  
Smashing with light clean in the middle of the world  
The tempests of the demon  
Spreading from end to end  
The yellow mane of dawn  
Embroidered with crops and songs  
O tell me is it the mad pomegranate-tree  
That swiftly unfastens the silk dress of the day?

In April's petticoats and the cicadas of August  
O tell me, she who plays, she who works, she who drives us  
crazy  
Shaking from Menace all his bad black shadows  
Pouring drunken birds into the sun  
O tell me she that opens her wings in the breast of things  
In the breast of our deep dreams  
Is it the mad pomegranate-tree?

## VITALIANO BRANCATI

### THE OLD MAN WITH THE TOP-BOOTS

*Translated from the Italian by Margaret Bottrall*

The Municipal Offices of my town are full of old papers. On Sunday mornings, when the janitors get their wives and daughters to help them sweep the floors, brush the vaulted ceilings and beat and thump the shelves, the dust displays itself at the windows like some restive beast which does not want to budge a step outside the dark stall in which it has been pleasantly lazing.

In 1930 those papers were so numerous and so frequently added to that they had to be balanced in the corners of the rooms, reaching up to the ceiling like great columns destined to strengthen the building. In the room at the end of the corridor, the least well lighted, the room which lots of people mistook for the lavatory, the minute-papers, the registers, the bulletins, the samples, the inventories not only lined the walls but formed, as it were, dividing walls. Between these, with extreme caution, a middle-aged man used to insert himself each morning. He was thin, and bent as tall people often are; he, however, was short, much shorter than the average; but not unpleasantly short, far from it. He was short in the least comic way; one of those little men who, one hears without surprise, are the fathers of tall, well-grown children.

This was Aldo Piscitello, the clerk, always the first to cross the threshold of the Town Hall, while the steps of the marble stair were not yet dry from their morning's washing, so that he left a record of his entry on the floor of the corridor, with the rather long tracks of those who shuffle their feet. Whatever the season, he turned up at the Town Hall in black coat, striped trousers, stiff collar and slouch hat with a patched ribbon. Maybe he was a little deaf, for really, anyone who had blood in his veins and was not deaf would have made

God knows what answer to the porter who, seeing him walking up the still wet staircase, always used to mutter, 'This chap must be wakened every morning by the horns he has on his head.' But perhaps he didn't have blood in his veins. Certainly he did not suffer from the heat, and when in July everyone was cursing the iniquitous hours of work and pulling at their trousers and rolling up their sleeves and putting their handkerchiefs inside their shirts to mop their chests and armpits, he never so much as puffed or put his hand to his stiff collar to loosen it.

However, this honest and quiet man had one defect which was very much out of character. He suffered from nervous yawning fits, which naturally overtook him on the most inopportune occasions. At the sound of his yawn, something between a groan and the cry of a new-born baby, the janitors would wake up grumbling, 'What an ugly row he makes, bad luck to him!'

Besides this defect, he had a secret; a bitter secret that could not be confessed. At fifty years of age and more, he had not succeeded in becoming a permanent clerk. 'Stop-gap!' his wife would shout at him when they quarrelled; and he ran to shut the window so that the neighbours should not hear. 'Temporary,' he would reply, 'but no mayor has ever given me notice, and no mayor ever will, for they all think well of me. All right, temporary—but it's just as if I were permanent!'

In spite of this, one morning in 1930 the mayor called him into his office and said to him, 'I shall have to sack you; you're not enrolled as a party member.'

Piscitello turned very pale, his head went further and further back. 'Oh, Lord!' he gasped. Then he half fell into an upholstered chair that stood in front of the table.

'Don't go on like that, for God's sake!' said the mayor, 'I have to carry out, in the most rigorous manner, the purge of the personnel; there are, between ourselves, a lot of unsound chaps around. But as far as you are concerned, if only out of regard for your wife, who is my wife's dressmaker ...'



'Why do you say dressmaker?' exclaimed Piscitello in the midst of painful yawns. 'I should never allow her to go out as a dressmaker. If sometimes, in a friendly way, she obliges your wife ...'

'Oh well,' said the mayor, puffing. 'The best thing you can do is to enrol yourself with the party. Do you want a bit of advice? Put yourself down in the *fascio* of Canicatti. The political secretary there is a client of mine; and if I say a word to him, and you on your part make him understand ... if you arrange it, in short, then, although the books are closed, he'll find some way to make your name appear on the lists as properly enrolled.'

'But,' said Piscitello, 'I have never meddled in political affairs, and I've always got along all right.'

'But now you've got to enrol yourself with the party! It's no yawning matter, I can tell you! Don't you realize that your daily bread is involved in it? Bread for you and your children! Come, we understand one another, Piscitello; I will delay the examination of the personnel, and you meanwhile will enrol yourself.'

'But sir, if only I need not—'

'Piscitello, you're crazy! There are ex-members of parliament and ministers who would give their eyes to be enrolled in the party. Unfortunately they are too well known as prize-champions of democracy and people's-party men, and we can't take them on board. What's more, if they don't stop their grumbling, we shall have to intern them. And you have to be begged and prayed! Who do you think you are? What are you doing, spitting at Fascism and the Duce? And do stop that yawning!'

'Your worship, His Excellency Mussolini is a god and I, speaking with all respect, am a shit. But I've always got along all right without meddling in politics—'

'Piscitello, goodbye. To-morrow you can tell me whether you wish to remain at your post or change your job.'

• Piscitello got up like a whipped dog, made two little bows that nobody noticed – for the mayor, head in hands, was

bending over his papers – and left the room, introducing, for the first time in his life, two fingers inside his collar with the intention of enlarging it.

That evening at home he told his wife what had happened to him. ‘And what are you going to do about it?’ asked his wife. ‘You’ll enrol yourself, of course!’

He made no answer until he had meticulously peeled his pear, wiped his penknife on his napkin, closed it and restored it to his pocket. ‘But, Rosina,’ said he, ‘I am not a Fascist.’

‘Then you’ll become one!’ said his wife.

Aldo Piscitello said nothing. He offered the peeled pear to his wife, lit the stump of a cigar, and sat there, watching the puffs of smoke which issued from his mouth, his hands clasped on the table. What the devil was he looking at with his right eye, under the raised eyebrow, and what strange dream was passing before the closed left eye that seemed to be sleeping?

For nearly two hours he stayed there like this, and did not notice that the table had been cleared, the ceiling lamp extinguished and another little light from the corridor put in its place, and his wife already gone to bed.

‘Aldo!’ she called. ‘Come on! Get to bed! I’ve something to say to you!’

He reddened suddenly, as if his wife had caught him sampling the food in the saucepan. Having hastily gone through his usual evening manœuvres, he was soon under the bed-clothes.

‘At bottom,’ said his wife, ‘Fascism is a very fine thing.’

‘I don’t say it isn’t,’ said he, always soft-spoken when giving a judgment.

‘You’ve been through the streets; they are orderly; nobody now disturbs respectable people. I like to see how it encourages young people too. Think how mad about Mussolini they all are!’

‘I don’t say no, I don’t say no. But I’ve always minded my own business, and now I don’t know what they’re getting at, with this Fascism.’

'Look here,' said his wife, who was beginning to get vexed, 'Thousands and thousands of people better than you and me say that Fascism is a fine thing, and you make such a song and dance about becoming a Fascist. ...'

'Much flattered, I'm sure! But, you see—'

'And the Pope? Do you know what the Pope said? That this man was sent by Providence! Then if the Pope, who is God's Vicar on earth, doesn't think twice about it ...'

And his wife went on in this strain until, raising herself on her right elbow, in the full flood of her eloquence, she perceived that her husband was asleep. Very slowly she returned to her supine position and went on arguing on her own. Towards two in the morning, unable to resist the malicious triumph of the conclusion to which her reasonings had brought her, she wakened her husband.

'Tell me, now, do you think yourself better than the Pope?'

'What? No! The Pope?' exclaimed Aldo Piscitello, in the terror inspired by the thought, in the dead of night, of Popes, Emperors, Kings, Dictators and Generals. These thoughts suggested dark abysses where only the wind dwelt. But then he calmed down, closed his eyes again and slowly, with a little splutter of saliva, he said, 'To-morrow I'll enrol myself in the *fascio*.'

\*

From 1930 to 1934 the life of Aldo Piscitello, in its smooth and measured simplicity, remains impenetrable.

On his black jacket he wore the Fascist badge, like a may-bug, and he looked at it from time to time, glancing down at it with such an enigmatic expression that anyone might have concluded 'He loves it, he likes it, he hates it, he fears it, it bothers him, it irritates him, he'll scratch it, he'll take it off, maybe he'll eat it, no, maybe he'll blow on it, what if he kisses it!'

But he contented himself with passing his left hand over it, as if to polish it, and he went on writing in his registers.

No one ever succeeded in getting a political judgment out of him. He carried out all his duties as a party member as

scrupulously as he had for twenty years carried out his duties as a clerk of the municipality. He wore his black shirt on the appointed days, he read the party newspaper, he attended the club of his district; and on Saturday afternoons, herded with the others, he visited the dusky museums and heard the foot-falls of the municipal clerks echoing among the cold marble of the statues. Although, at this point of time, the heads of most Italians (completely shaven in army fashion and held erect upon rigid and padded shoulders of sports coats) were beginning by degrees to breathe fire and slaughter (starting with the youths and the athletes, then the old men and the professional men and those well thought of) the face of Aldo Piscitello kept its old kind expression, so that he looked more like the portrait of an Italian yellowed by time than a real live Italian. This kind expression caught the section-leader's eye when he pompously let it rove from the platform of the district club around the audience in black shirts.

'You, comrade, down there!'

Piscitello got up with the sweetest and most respectful smile that was ever seen. 'I?'

'Yes, you!' The section-leader scrutinized him, perplexed. He felt that this man was not on the right track, and was not doing just what he should, but as he didn't know precisely what was going wrong, he contented himself with exclaiming, 'What the devil!'

A spy was set at Piscitello's heels, not because he was a personage to worry about, but just as an experiment, and because there were so many spies that they didn't know how to spend their days. The spy reported seven words of a political trend, all full of respect for Fascism; he added that Piscitello, when he passed the photograph of the Duce, four foot by three, displayed at the main cross-roads of Palermo, used to touch the brim of his hat; and finally, as a very slightly suspicious utterance, though not politically so, he quoted the following, spoken by Piscitello to a local judge: 'If my sister-in-law didn't help me a little with her earnings, I assure you I couldn't make ends meet.'

It was in 1934, and in Piscitello's house they ate each day two or three things less than might have been considered needful for a rather thin man of fifty-four, a woman who worked in the house (and probably outside the house too, Piscitello had never gone into this matter) and three children ravenous as wolves who according to Piscitello were his offspring.

So when it was known that the State was paternally giving a bonus of two thousand lire to all employees who belonged to the Old Guard, Piscitello found himself so fervently embraced by his wife that he had to cough for quite a while.

'And how do we come into it?' said Piscitello, pointing to himself, his wife and his children. 'We aren't *squadristi*!'

'That's all right,' said Rosina. 'What an innocent you are!'

Goodness knows how this demon of a woman had contrived it, but three weeks later, Aldo Piscitello learnt that he had registered as a party member in 1921, that he was awaiting due recognition as a member of the Old Guard, and that he had incurred the obligation of decorating his black shirt with a red ribbon, 'symbol of blood shed and spilt.'

The day on which his wife sewed two red stripes on his wristbands (throwing off sparks of joy at the two thousand lire which had already arrived and were spread out on the table) a very strange trait was superimposed on Aldo Piscitello's habitually mild face. He was accustomed to keep his mouth shut, and if he had to speak or smile he only opened it a very little, and hastened to close it almost before his last word had succeeded in becoming articulate or his smile had fully emerged. From this moment, however, though he continued to keep his mouth shut, it was with a visible effort that he kept his lips together.

Wearing this odd expression, he spent the years 1934 and '35. His utterances, always very brief, were reduced to a few monosyllables; but his actions and habits, though as silent as those of a domestic animal, remained politically quite unexceptionable. By this time his face was to be seen in the



numerous photographs of Fascist groups, always, however, with this peculiar expression; already his name figured in certain invidious albums which, bound in the Fascist tri-colour, used to be offered to ministers and party inspectors by impudent great girls; and whenever the mayor talked to his employees, he used to look at Piscitello every time that he said 'We old Fascists, we scarred veterans. ...'

On the same day as Piscitello had said 'Yes, why not?' to a friend who asked whether the top-booted division regarded their duties as sacrosanct, and had later made a grimace, not exactly of approval but vaguely smiling in a damp consenting way, à propos of the newly initiated persecution of the Jews in Germany, on that same evening this thin, taciturn, fifty-four-year-old man performed an action ... well, this is what he did.

When he got home and saw that none of the family was in the house, he tore the Fascist badge off his jacket, spat on it a couple of times, threw it on the ground and stamped on it; then he picked it up again, crushed as it was and reduced to the semblance of a black-beetle, and looked at it closely, but only for a moment. He threw it into the urinal and pissed on it; then with a stick he pulled it out, cleaned it with soap and water, adjusted it as best he could and put it back in his buttonhole.

When his wife and children got home, Piscitello was sitting in a corner of the dining-room, still, silent, with a fixed look; only his chest was heaving up and down, just like a fevered gasping bird. 'What's the matter with him?' wondered his wife, stealthily wiping the colour from her lips on the back of her hand. 'Come here, Maria!' she said to the eldest daughter, who came along, adjusting the white Young Italy jacket which held and moulded her two plump breasts so nicely.

'What's wrong with you?' asked the wife.

Aldo Piscitello raised his eyes, looked at his wife and daughter and pulled down his lips like a bowstring. 'How hideous you are!' he said.

From that precise moment the story of Aldo Piscitello

changes completely and seems like the story of someone else. What in the world had they done to this mild man, who had never concerned himself with politics, who had never had great ideals or ambitions, nor felt the need of space and liberty for his projects? In what secret place had they touched him? And how, without seeming to do so, had the society in which he was living managed to catch him by the neck so as to make him flap like a hen who has suddenly realized the intention of the hand that seemed about to stroke it?

Aldo Piscitello was now possessed by hate, the most frantic and blind hate. It was such a disproportionate passion (like a strong, tempestuous wind in a pair of drawers), it implanted itself with such difficulty, that the little man seemed to creak and squeak in every joint; he was no longer able to stand still, quiet and composed, or to close his mouth completely, or to lose himself entirely in sleep. Even while he slept the words 'Beasts! Cuckolds!' fell from his lips – softly of course, merely breathed out, but with a little spatter of saliva at the end which wet the pillow or Rosina's shoulder. Going through the streets, beside him and at shoulder height there was always his saluting right hand, manifesting disapproval, saying 'No' and 'Go to hell.' At a time when everyone was full of pride and optimism, and even the violinist in the lonely alley was trying out marching tunes, and the children on the sixth floor were learning patriotic hymns, and the old teacher who had never sung in his life brayed hymns at table between one mouthful and another, and the drunkard at night reeling with his back to a lamp-post croaked out 'We shall dom-in-ate the world', at a time when flag-poles creaked night and day on the balconies, Aldo Piscitello made his disgruntled 'Ugh!' echo under many of the great doorways which he used to pass on his way home.

He attended political ceremonies as before, and perhaps with greater assiduity. He went stiffening his shoulders as though to stifle the painful yet pleasing shudder which made him tremble all over. Imagine him in the hall of the local club; he was now very close to the objects of his hate, he

could almost rub noses with them; on every side he was beset by an abundance of dreams and obsessions. As though through a distorting lens, he was in a position to see how idiotic they were, how stupefied, how overbearing on the one hand and how despicable on the other, how dangerous, stunted, misbegotten, deformed!

On the 28th of October, solemn anniversary of the march on Rome, he got up early and permitted himself a most unusual pleasure. Retiring to the smallest room of the house he lit a cigar of the Rome brand and smoked it slowly, contemplating from every angle the hand which held the cigar between thumb and middle finger. A great calm was in his right eye, a greater in his left, and his motionless nose seemed immersed in the air like a flower-stalk in water; his mouth exhaled silent puffs. It was as if he were vaguely involved in life rather than actually living. Until the clock of the school struck eight.

Brutally crushing out his cigar, Aldo Piscitello jumped to his feet, left the little room and ran to his bedroom. There, without so much as a glance at his sleeping wife, he flung open the shutters and began to rummage in the chest of drawers.

‘What are you looking for, if I may ask?’ said his wife, rubbing her hand across her cheeks.

Piscitello meanwhile had pulled out from a heap of white things a sort of funereal rag; it was his black shirt. ‘What the hell, Rosina, is this shirt dirty? Who has dirtied it like this?’

‘I really don’t know.’

Only after a minute or two did he recall that on the evening of the last Fascist Saturday reunion he had, before putting his shirt away, danced on it.

‘Do you want me to iron it?’ asked his wife.

‘No, Rosina, please stay in bed, let me do it!’

He wanted to do it all by himself and nobody dared gainsay him. So he actually heated the iron, pressed the shirt and brushed it. He wanted to be alone while carrying out these rapid operations, for he appeared to be mouthing some

strange words. Then he put on his shirt; and his wife and children saw him go to and fro in his white underpants and black shirt, carrying his zouave breeches in his hand. He went up and down, looking for a convenient place and mouthing, ever faster, his strange words. Finally he found the place he was looking for in the little dining-room, between the sideboard and the wall. Here he sat down on a low stool and, raising his stick-like legs in the air, he plunged them into the zouave breeches. Crossing his legs as far in front of himself as he could, he tied the laces on his shins; but he had not finished yet, in fact the fun was only now beginning. Opposite him stood the top-boots, as if saying 'We want you, ill-fated *squadrista*!'

'Rosina!' called Aldo Piscitello, now incapable of struggling alone, 'And you, Maria, Daughter of the Wolf, come and help me!'

Mother and daughter leapt from their beds, knelt before him and did their utmost to force the boot on, pushing it by the heel while he, clinging and pulling, made such efforts that he almost burst. But the attempts of all three were fruitless, and he collapsed, shouting 'Call the porter, you are good for nothing!' But the porter, a trusty member of the local club and the one person in the building who owned a boot-jack, had gone to the flat above, to help the president of the tribunal who, being very fat, was squeezing and contorting himself with tears in his eyes so as to be ready for the assembly.

By God's help Aldo Piscitello also managed to get ready, and having put on his jacket of military cloth he buckled the wide leather belt over his thin belly. Then he went to the mirror, while his wife with a sigh said to the daughter, 'Fetch a cloth!' For in fact it always happened that when the mirror had reflected its owner in his uniform the glass was left with a blob of spittle on it, a slimy appendage which as it disintegrated made the glass look as though it were laughing malignantly or, the devil knows why, weeping.

The president of the tribunal, meeting on the stairs Aldo Piscitello who was a member of the Old Guard, saluted him

first, raising his flabby yellow hand above his head, and Piscitello gave him precedence in order to enjoy the sight of this fleshy man bitten into, pinched and made a sight of by the violently tight straps which bound him. But this sight was not the only one he enjoyed on that memorable day, and on his way home he was able to say 'How deformed we are, good God! Anything but a warrior race!'

'Is that so?' exclaimed his wife sarcastically. 'Then it's not true that the average height of Italians has increased by a centimetre since the coming of Fascism?'

'It's not true, it's not true!' he shouted.

'As far as you are concerned, they never speak the truth, even by mistake!'

'No, never! What they say is never true!'

'Defeatist!' muttered his wife between her teeth.

'What they say makes me sick! I'd hide underground rather than listen to it!'

But meantime, 'what they say' they said louder and louder, ever closer to the ear. The neighbours' radio was always on, making the glasses and decanters, the panes in the windows and sideboard echo with Fascist cheers and hand-clappings and shouts of 'Believe! Obey! Fight!' And as the Abyssinian war had broken out, the shops had fixed the loud-speakers of their sets on the balconies, so that the streets were like tunnels grooved out between imperialist Fascist war-cries.

1936 and '37 were the blackest years for Aldo Piscitello. He felt as solitary as a fly in January, and was afraid of walking on those parts of the pavement where the stormy shadows of flags seemed to be hollowing out abysses. It was then that Padalino the lawyer, an ex-democrat who had never enrolled himself as a party member, said to him, 'My dear Piscitello, they are right; don't you see that they are winning?' And the chief accountant, who had once spat at the Duce's portrait, drew him aside one evening on returning from a journey to Rome and confided to him, 'This new cap with a peak really becomes him; it was quite a revelation to me; he has the



profile of the classical Romans, that must be admitted.' And the old chemist Platania, once a political prisoner, when the two of them went for walks together through the empty street used to turn his grizzled beard to right and left, murmuring, 'Careful, careful, Piscitello! Don't speak so loud!'

One evening his wife cleared the table in haste, sat down opposite him, leant her crossed arms on the table and bent forward saying to him, 'Now let's get this straight; what harm has Fascism done to you?'

Aldo Piscitello reddened like someone on the brink of unheard-of pleasures; a thousand impulses flooded into his mind, his memory suggested so many possible words that he could have talked till to-morrow, could have talked without ever stopping; but in fact, when it came to the point, the only arguments he found were these. 'Everything disagreeable, that's what Fascism does. The singers at the opera aren't allowed to give an encore. There's no pleasure left in drinking a cup of coffee. We've got to say "voi" to all and sundry, and yet a youngster in a superior position can call me "tu" ...' and he reproduced all the offensive intonations with which they could call him "tu". 'They teach the children to sing from morning to night as if they were at the opera instead of teaching them educational subjects and all that; we have to salute with raised hands as if we were warding off a blow or a spit! And then, we have to wear top-boots.'

There was a pause.

'Is that the lot?' said his wife.

Aldo Piscitello was confused; he looked down at the table, then raised his eyes full of all the things which he wanted to say and ought to say, but which he could not say. Why did no canto of Milton or Leopardi on Liberty, no volume of a forbidden philosopher, fly to the aid of this poor man, tortured by all the pains which an honest spirit can receive from oppression and yet incapable of saying why he suffered? A very ordinary woman, who had followed a course of instruction for country housewives, got the better of him and laughed in his face.

He took his revenge a year later, during the Spanish war, wakening his wife who on the previous evening had clapped her hands at the radio's announcement of the bombing of Valencia. 'And you call yourself a Catholic and a Christian? You make the sign of the cross and kiss the Sacred Heart? You who are delighted by the bombing of a city where there are children, and women better than you are, and sick people?'

His wife pretended not to hear. Towards dawn, she answered him. 'The important thing is that we win. Then, yes, we can think about formalities. I bet,' she added, raising her body like a standard of victory to a sitting position in the bed, 'I bet you don't like Italy winning!'

He sat up beside her, fastening his eyes on hers. 'You've spoken the truth,' he said, 'I don't like Italy winning!'

'And why not?'

Alas, as usual Aldo Piscitello did not know. But he knew that there was a reason, and that it shone on the world by night like a starry sky and by day shone like the sun. He seized his wife by the chin and in a demoniacal caress brought her face close, close to his, so that their noses touched, and with clenched teeth and lips curled back he repeated, 'Because I don't like it!'

He suddenly resumed the argument with his wife a few days later, in the following words. 'I used to be mad about Italy. When I heard the Royal March, I always felt like crying. But this,' he went on, in an unusual tone, 'this is not Italy. This is a bunch of rascals who want to spill our blood in order to oppress us the more! If this Italy wins, the Italians will lose the ... will lose a ...' Here he faltered, and turning aside cautiously he tried, like a schoolboy, to glance at a sheet of paper which he held in his palm, on which he had written a few words heard in a café.

'Oh good,' exclaimed his wife. 'Learning your lesson!'

He reddened to the ears, drank a glass of water, tore up the sheet of paper and some others which he had in his pocket and was overcome by a series of yawns each more

painful than the last. His wife was quite put out by them. 'But what's wrong with you? What do you want?'

Aldo Piscitello moved about a little, rummaged in his pockets as if in search of the papers he had torn up, and then seemed to become softened; and he fixed on his wife that look of a poor sick animal in which he tremblingly took refuge when he could not find words with which to answer her.

Two more years passed in this manner. And then the newspapers and the radio ordered the black-out. And when the street lamps were reduced each to a red spark with a bluish glimmering thread around it, and the shrine-lamps were extinguished, blotting out Madonnas and Sacred Hearts from the slate walls; when the lights of the cemetery chapels were put out, plunging into total darkness those who were perpetually enclosed there; when the stairways and the attics were dark, and one single ray, escaping needle-thin from a balcony, would provoke cries of horror and alarm; when the whole town looked like a heap of damp coal, and when nothing could be seen of passers-by except their feet, perhaps, lit up by a pocket-torch, or their mouths at the moment of lighting a cigarette; then Aldo Piscitello looking from his balcony would say, 'Darkness in their hearts and darkness outside; that's good.'

Although he was very frightened of the air-raid alarms, and was one of the first to run to shelter, with a child in his arms and his wife coming after him bringing his braces, he nevertheless became red as a turkey-cock when they told him that all the English bombs had got damp in the dumps at Malta and wouldn't burst, that the English aeroplanes got rid of them outside the city not through consideration but because they feared the gunfire, and that they would not have hesitated so long with such armaments to vanquish Fascism, had it not been that the whole world was already Fascist and there was therefore nothing to be done about it.

One Sunday Aldo Piscitello ran a real risk of ending up in prison. Cirene, Tobruk and Benghasi had fallen; the Germans had reached Sicily; the troop-ships tossed in the straits

of Messina, all bristling with armed Germans standing with binoculars fixed to their eyes. The flat roofs of Palermo looked like trays of white figs, they were so crowded with naked Germans taking sun-baths; and on the first-floor balconies little mirrors were hung so that Germans in their underpants could see to shave themselves, while in the street below, in front of the damp warehouse where the bersaglieri were lodged, an old woman stopped to say to a sergeant looking like an escaped convict, 'And you, my boy, do you shave only on Sundays?' The German officers, quartered in the principal hotel, had received instructions to wear an expression of pride and confidence when they stood listening to the bulletins from headquarters, so as to encourage the poor people gathered round the loud-speaker. All the same, the officers (though their eyes remained motionless) noticed that the more adverse the news, the more numerous were the suppressed smiles, the winks, the taps and the nudges; and at the counter of the bar there would be a sudden increase in the number of the friends who were drinking there, touching glasses and raising them with a wink of the eye.

'How queer these Italians are!' thought the German officers, moving like a row of black stars from one side of the hall to the other to break the glances of hatred that enveloped them.

'It's for your damned sakes that we've got to carry on this war,' grumbled Aldo Piscitello one Sunday. 'You can't have enough of it, can you! Of course, why not? Everybody lets himself be ordered about by you, you low-down bastards, when you don't know even how to close a door civilly, you anti-Christian killers of Poles, you slaughterers of poor Jews who are honest working men. ...'

Ill luck would have it that at this moment a spy was secretly photographing the hall. Developed and enlarged, the photograph showed Rosso the lawyer, who was still smiling and straining his ears to catch the bad news transmitted by the radio, and at a short distance Aldo Piscitello, who was looking at a German with his chin tilted to the left and flames

issuing from his nostrils. Rosso was put in prison, but the disciplinary commission did not know what course to follow as regards Piscitello. The expression of his face was certainly most peculiar, but was it really an expression of hatred, and not simply one of discomfort? Who could be sure that it was not due to two or three yawns stifled at birth? At all events, the commission asked the mayor, who was a 'trustworthy man' or, as they used to say in those days, 'a new man', to suspend Piscitello's salary for a month.

And indeed, one day an usher came into his little office with a malicious smile: 'The mayor wants you!'

'Some piece of bad news,' thought Aldo Piscitello, who had not entered the mayor's office with its empire furniture since 1930.

Cautiously, like a cat coming among strangers, Piscitello introduced himself into the great room, at the far end of which the mayor was awaiting him, in his Old Guard uniform, standing stiffly behind the table. Beside the table, there stood stiffly a federal inspector, also in a black uniform, with a silver death's-head on his arm and a head of Mussolini on his chest. Both of them stiffly glared at Piscitello with chins raised, and he came forward very slowly, almost losing his sense of direction, for fear had so seized him by the shoulders that it seemed to be urging him towards the balcony rather than the table.

'You are a traitor!' came the loud and sudden words. The voice was the mayor's. 'What took you to the Albergo Centrale on Sunday morning?'

'One of these days,' said the inspector – or perhaps that is what he said, for his voice was so raucous that one couldn't be sure whether he was speaking or clearing his throat, 'I remember ... the good old times ... emetics ... truncheons ...'

'If it happens once again,' added the mayor, 'I'll throw you out of the town hall with my own hands!' He thereupon turned on his heels to the right and faced the inspector, who turned on his heels to the left and faced the mayor. Mayor and inspector, their faces clearing, completely forgot Piscitello



and began to talk about the Duce, the Axis, victory, empire, *lebensraum*, racialism, the turn of events, the recently instituted corps of saboteurs and the corps of musketeers long ago instituted by the Duce. Chatting thus, they crossed the room and reached the door. Piscitello was on the point of falling asleep on his feet, he was so unnerved by fear, mistrust and discomfort, when a sound as of blows – but actually of spurs and heels clicking – woke him. The two stood rigidly facing one another, chin to chin, arms raised, eyes exchanging vulture's glances. But then, smiling, they relaxed. The inspector went out and the mayor returned to his table. Piscitello followed the mayor, gazing at that portion of his anatomy which lay between his top-boots and his belt; but when he dared to look him in the face, he had to admit that something diabolical was about to happen. The mayor's hard expression seemed to dissolve rapidly like wax in the fire; a smile, which looked like the old well-known smile, appeared on his lips, he closed his left eye as a sign of understanding, and his left ear, involved by the wrinkles of the smile, waggled a friendly greeting to Piscitello.

'Noodle!' said the mayor, in a low, altered voice. 'You let yourself be taken in like a child! And wake up, for goodness' sake! The defeat can't be long delayed.'

'Whose defeat?' asked Piscitello, almost choked by his fear of understanding.

'How do you mean, whose? Ours! Do you suppose that the world is going to be conquered by a nation whose civilians wear top-boots and whose soldiers have no shoes?'

The mayor invited Piscitello to sit beside him on the sofa and confessed to him that he detested Fascism, the town council, the minister for home affairs, the empire and himself in uniform. 'But don't you tell a soul!'

'Oh, Mr. Mayor!' cried Piscitello, raising his hands and almost prostrating himself. Then they talked about Colonel Stevens, who according to the mayor 'expressed himself like an angel' and who, according to Piscitello, was not a colonel at all but a general who did not want to admit to being a

general. Remembering his accents, they got so excited that they were on the point of embracing one another. 'What in the world does he look like?' they wondered. The mayor imagined him tall and dark; Piscitello, fair and stalwart; the mayor, greying a little, Piscitello, rather bald; the mayor, married, Piscitello, married with three children; the mayor, rich; Piscitello, not very rich; the mayor, well dressed in civilian clothes and rather careless in uniform, Piscitello, always in uniform ... when all of a sudden, 'Get out!' thundered the mayor, 'Get out at once!' He had risen to his feet and with outstretched arm was pointing to the door, where the secretary-general had appeared with a file in his hand. 'Go on, get out!'

Piscitello got up more dead than alive and manfully fighting against the terror which had again seized him by the shoulders and was urging him, as usual, towards the balcony, he got to the door; and as he made his way out he heard the mayor still shouting, 'And you, secretary, suspend his salary for a month!'

Piscitello fell ill that evening.

'They are all the same,' he murmured, pressing his fevered cheek against the pillow. 'He wanted to make me talk! And how shall I get on without this month's salary?'

However, on the following day the mayor came in person to visit him. Piscitello's wife and children stood looking at him as if he were a miracle from heaven, and Rosina said, 'I heard your wonderful speech on the empire, Mr. Mayor!' But he asked them to leave him alone with the sick man.

'Piscitello!' exclaimed the mayor, almost before the door was closed. 'You are an absolute child! Didn't you understand that I had to act as I did because the secretary-general came in, and he's a well-known spy?'

Piscitello had not the strength to make the transition from fear to joy, and he contented himself with touching the mayor's hand with his own.

'As for the salary,' added the mayor. 'Allow me to refund it out of my own pocket,' and he put an envelope on the

bedside table. 'And now, come on, Piscitello, for God's sake get well as soon as you can!' The mayor lowered his voice. 'The Americans have landed in Africa!'

'Fetch my trousers!' shouted Piscitello to his wife, 'I want to get dressed!'

\*

When the bombs and shells began to fall on the city, Aldo Piscitello, together with many others, fled to a little village near Etna. He left the city one morning under a sun whose heat seemed to crack the stones, and began the journey on foot towards this village, in a procession of poor people with handkerchiefs tied round their heads, who carried their jackets and sometimes their shoes and stockings in their hands.

On the ninth of July Piscitello went down with typhus. For two days he had the pleasure of resting his legs, numb with poison, and talking in the evenings to a very sage doctor, who used to sit at the bed's head in order to pass on to him, quietly, the news from London.

'Doctor,' begged Piscitello, dazed with his headache, his fever and a joy as furious as the fever. 'You tell my wife, tell her that that man has ruined us!'

'What's the need for me to tell her so?' said the doctor. 'All she has to do is to go to the window and look out!'

The woman stood stiff and silent by the bed, looking at her husband's bald head that was flushed with fever.

'Yes! It's no use your looking at me,' he said. 'He has ruined us! I shall say so to everyone, I don't care if I'm put under arrest or in prison, he has ruined us, he has drunk our blood!'

'Don't shout, Mr. Piscitello,' advised the doctor. 'It's bad for you.'

'But now the British and the Americans are coming, and they'll pay him back a hundred per cent, they'll give him his bellyful! They'll rub the noses of these tyrants in the dust!'

These were the last clear and coherent words which he spoke before delirium took entire possession of him. And he

did not see, or saw only as if in a dream, that he was taken to the hospital at Giarre; and here he was abandoned by all except the flies, which rained on his bed and crawled over his sheets, moist and dense as a mass of currants. Thousands of flies covered him night and day, shifting angrily for a moment when he turned, but returning at once to clothe him from head to foot.

The wounded, the torn, the mutilated victims of the bombing filled the adjoining rooms, and the few doctors of the hospital had no time to care for this old man who had no wounds. There was no gauze, there was no cottonwool. The poor doctors did not know how to explain to the wounded that they had played a most frightfully silly and inappropriate trick, to be paid for by atrocious suffering, in not dying at once among the ruins as so many of their companions had done.

Finally a bombardment from the sea sent this miserable charnel-house spinning, and Aldo Piscitello, with a very slight wound on his forehead, was carried home again to the little village and was restored to his family who were already lamenting his death.

But he got better, by a trick of fate he got better, and he was on the balcony when a foreign army poured through the streets of all the cities and villages in the Etna region, on wagons, armoured trucks, gun-carriages, cars, motorcycles tractors, lorries and light vans, and the thundering and rumbling resounded through sky and sea and underground, chasing the birds from the bushes, the rats from the sewers, and the starved cats on to the tiles.

Aldo Piscitello saluted the half-naked, red-skinned soldiers, happy that the glances of so many 'free men' should pass over his house and look at the wall which still bore in huge letters the words 'Only God can bend the Fascist will; men or things, never.' And to all the glances and smiles, though they were not directed at him, he scrupulously replied, each time raising his emaciated hand with the index and middle fingers parted in the V sign.

By evening he was as tired as if he had been carrying a hundred-kilo torch in the Good Friday procession. He had not enough breath left to reply to his wife and daughter who were doing all they could to make him understand that now they were in complete agreement with him.

'Is it true or isn't it that the Fascists told us a pack of nonsense? Aren't the English nice, such civil people! Look at the biscuits, weren't they good! And the chocolate, that was fine, too! Oh, but you know, those Fascists were really criminals! I like the Americans best ... no, think how gentlemanly the English are ... Yes, but the Americans have got something about them ... all right, but the English, look— What's wrong with your father this evening?'

All that was wrong with Piscitello was this; he could not find within himself one single word to say. Up to the day before, his brain had teemed with words as a stone in the country can teem with ants; words of protest, contempt, impatience, exasperation, ran through his brain and through his veins, and came to his lips, which he struck with his palm as though to seal them shut; and they left on his tongue a strong taste like mouldy coffee or a stopped-up tobacco-pipe. Now, however, he felt his brain as smooth and bare as a stone in a rapid stream, a rounded, heavy stone, a sleepiness that weighed his head down, while Rosina and Maria, still excited by the questions which they had put to him, awaited his reply.

'Well, I'm off to bed,' said Aldo Piscitello, and he went with his candle to the corner of the big room where his bed was.

During the night he woke twice and both times heard dinning at the windows the melancholy sound of the Scottish bagpipes from the balcony of the town hall. For years he had been used, on waking, to feel his mouth still echoing with the 'Beasts' and 'Cuckolds' which he had thrown out while sleeping. Now instead he heard this sad, foreign sound, no longer something within his mouth, but outside the house. Dazed by the change in himself and by all that was happening, he fell asleep again, deeply asleep for hours and hours.



He slept without encountering a single image or memory or gross or trivial word, not so much as a monosyllable; without ever touching bottom. The next morning, slowly, slowly and with unspeakable efforts he managed between ten-thirty and eleven to wake up.

'*Prosit!*' said his wife. 'You've been sleeping like a child, and you look as if you aren't satisfied yet!'

He smiled, really like a child, and asked them to leave him in bed a little longer.

After he had been a week in the house, sleeping most of the time, he dressed himself unassisted in his usual outfit, black jacket and striped trousers, now so old and discoloured that they looked like a pencil drawing badly rubbed out, and he attempted a little walk. On the way he met old friends, but each time, after five minutes of silence and embarrassment, he would shake hands, say 'All right, see you soon', and go away.

Neither hate nor love now dwelt in this bent little man, who walked along poking forward on a long thin neck a head that was like marble, worn away and polished all over. He had become as insignificant as he had always been before the year 1930. The mosquitoes which nightly in the darkness of the big room used to attack in hundreds the bodies of his wife and children spared him entirely, for mosquitoes at night need blood to drink, not water. By day on the other hand they all came to rest on his face as being the quietest shelter in the house. His wife was maddened at seeing his face covered with mosquitoes walking around or sleeping. 'But don't you feel them on you, mercy of God!' she would say sharply. 'Raise a hand, can't you!' 'Yes, why not?' he would answer, and to give his wife pleasure, he would raise his hand; but even here he showed his clumsiness, for he would strike his neck when the insects were on his forehead or his forehead when they were on his neck.

Meanwhile, something was being prepared for him; a fate of which he knew nothing; and indeed nothing became his face and his whole person better than this knowing nothing.

Platania the chemist, once a political internee, had been nominated mayor of the city. 'If I'm not mistaken,' said Piscitello's wife, 'the new mayor is a friend of yours. You'll end up promoted to the permanent staff!'

But this was not the fate which was being prepared for Piscitello. The future held in custody no advancement or reward for him; and indeed, what advancement or reward was likely to have gone such a strange and seldom traversed road? The thing that was coming to Piscitello, about which he knew nothing, was his abrupt dismissal from the post of clerk to the municipality.

In the mayor's anteroom, amidst the dust of the plaster which had fallen as a result of the last bombardment, there were always five or six men moving around, getting dirtied with the white dust and running nails into their shoes, who when they happened to get together at the round table in the middle of the room would beat on it with their fists and call for justice; and their first demand was that all members of the Old Guard should be sent away. They had learned the names of the *squadristi* by heart, so that the decorated ceilings and the torn hangings would often echo with cries of 'Aldo Piscitello ... that Piscitello!'

The mayor found himself in a sea of confusion. 'What am I to do?' he said, taking up and putting down the papers referring to Piscitello. 'After all, I have got to carry out the purge, and in the most rigorous manner!'

One morning he decided to take the bull by the horns, and he went in person to see Piscitello in the little village near Etna. The conversation between the two was at first very halting and subdued; presently it became more animated. That is to say, at the beginning, Piscitello remained silent and the mayor spoke seldom and briefly, whereas later on Piscitello remained silent and the mayor hurled one word after another.

'I can't do otherwise! I've got to carry out the purge, in the most rigorous manner! I know how you felt. But the fact remains that you are a member of the Old Guard. Hell take

it, a *squadrista*! I would pardon violence, specially when it has been followed by repentance. But violence breeds violence! And how is one to persuade the others to pardon old offences? I've got to sack you! I can do no less.'

At this point the mayor looked at Piscitello, from whom he probably expected a curse. But Piscitello's face was devoid of colour, of curiosity and even of wakefulness, for his eyelids were only half raised, and all that could be seen of his eyes was white, so that his marble face was more marmoreal than ever. The mosquitoes who wandered about on it, cleaning their wings and conveniently dispatching their other business, made its pallor the more striking by contrast.

The mayor seemed worried, and when at last Piscitello said 'Yes - why not?' he let out a sigh of relief. He judged that the moment had come for bidding him good-bye before he relapsed into his impenetrable silence. And in fact he said good-bye, clapping him affectionately on the shoulder, then embracing him and finally kissing him on his icy forehead.

In his car on the way back, the mayor was perplexed, confounded, yet in a way satisfied; for the justice, the punishment, the wrong (to put it plainly) that he had carried out had not, thank God, been done to a real live man, but to a being scarcely more alive than the chair which that same being had occupied for forty years in his daily work sitting at a table in the municipal offices. As for the family, he would presently look into the possibilities of helping Mrs. Piscitello, who had always been a good woman.

## CLIFFORD DYMENT

### *THE SWANS*

MIDSTREAM they met. Challenger and champion,  
They fought a war for honour  
Fierce, sharp, but with no honour:  
Each had a simple aim and sought it quickly.  
The combat over the victor sailed away  
Broken, but placid as is the gift of swans,  
Leaving his rival to his shame alone.  
I listened for a song according to story,  
But this swan's death was out of character --  
No giving up of the grace of life  
In a sad lingering music.  
I saw a beaten swan rise on the water  
As though to outreach pain, its webbed feet  
Banging the river helplessly, its wings  
Loose in a last hysteria. Then the neck  
Was floating like a rope and the swan was dead.  
It drifted away and all around it swan's down  
Bobbed on the river like children's little boats.

# RONALD BOTTRALL

## PROMETHEUS

REBEL titan, flying into the sun  
Flying higher than the gods  
To bring earthwards light  
Shrouded in a fennel stalk,  
You miscounted the odds.

Fear of the light, burned fingers,  
Have driven inward our darkness,  
Built obscuring lenses over the awakened eye.  
Living in our own shadow  
Fear is behind us as we turn.

Thronging around you came the blind  
To turn ploughshares into swords  
The deaf to talk scandal and bind  
The wheelwright to the gun-carriage  
The mute to listen to the clash of words  
And the hissing of the explosive missile  
The paralysed to scratch  
Indecent graffiti on the ruined wall.

Fire waxing and waning  
In a steel magnate's cigar;  
Fire refining the mouth  
And bursting from the past  
With streaming hair like a new star.  
Fire held mutinous in the chains  
Of Hephaistos, far from the sun.  
Fire glowing in icy caverns  
Fire bleeding molten in the heart.



Then the horror of enveloping wings  
And the dissecting beak, a living death,  
Your own self-murder, death  
In the morning as the lark sings.  
With the dewfall, with the rising of the nightingale,  
Nightly healing and renewal  
With the dream of the day without death.

Dying hand to mouth  
We live your death  
Daily dying of the surfeit  
Of our own entrails, tangled in our intestines  
Like horses gored in the bull-ring.  
We live in your dreams.

Dreamt by girls climbing the stairs of shops  
Dreams are interpreted by old men  
Peering into ledgers, peeping  
Round the corners of the world. The formula  
Applied equally and precisely to  
The untouched food at the edge of the plate  
Laughing hysterically at the spoon  
And the bright darting swallows of desire.  
Yesterday was the day of the vulture on the mountain.  
But dreams are not always yesterday.  
Like beacons of intolerable hope  
Dreams burn into to-morrow,  
Smouldering craters of Promethean fire.

# NELSON ALGREN

## *THE CHILDREN*

Two weeks before Thanksgiving the third-floor guard hung a bright wall motto above the piano in the playroom:

### I GROW OLD LEARNING SOMETHING NEW EACH DAY

States Kaszuba stood studying the motto while fingering a five-and-dime toothbrush hanging by a string about his throat. About him stood nine other youths, in varying attitudes of spiritlessness, each in the same grey clothes. They were waiting for a rehearsal of their Thanksgiving Day play, to be offered, ultimately, to the ladies of the Polonia Women's Federation. Until the arrival of that group's representatives, the boys had a few moments in which to scoff at the new motto. Kaszuba alone refused to scoff; in fact, he began reproaching the scoffers.

'It says just right,' he told them. 'Every day you could learn up somp'n new, if you just stay on yer toes. Look at me. Here for larceny of a V-8. But if I'd learned up somp'n new, I wouldn't be here fer no t'eft a-tall. I'd be here fer tamperin' is all. It'd be a missed-meaner is all. Like when you strong-arm-rob a guy'n it's just m'licious mischief.'

'Yeh,' the boy called Silly Louie offered. 'Like when it's a dame 'n then she says you sex-utory-raped her.'

Three overdressed women bustled in behind the guard, and the talk stopped dead. One of the women twirled the piano stool downward and ran her fingers down the keyboard. States had seen her play at a dance: he had watched the dancing through an alley window. He watched her pull the stool up in an effort to circumvent her bosom, till he

couldn't see the stool for the spread of the hips. The stubby hands poised dramatically above the keys and she glanced sidewise without turning her head, like a hen, to see that no one was slouching. Each boy laid his hand on the shoulder of the boy ahead.

'All right, boys! Indian braves!'

The two other women and the guard applauded lackadaisically, the piano began with a bang, and States led his tribe, loping indifferently, onto the uncarpeted stage; the planks bent under their feet as they circled it. Then they faced an imaginary foe in attitudes of Comanches drawing Comanche bows, and sang halfheartedly:

'Ten little Indian braves are we  
- None but da birds so free as we!'

'Some song,' States murmured sullenly to Silly Louie. What were the crows always coming around to rub things in for? His tribe loped, in a heavy-footed war dance, slapping their mouths with their palms.

'Ay-yee! Ay-yee! Ay-yee!'

'Some Indians,' he added from the corner of his mouth, nodding toward the three Negroes at the end of the line. And wondered vaguely why they couldn't be paratroopers for a change. The pianiste waved absently, and the braves become squaws:

'Ten little Indian squaws at home!  
Grind the wheat! Grind the corn!'

She brought the pedal down hard on 'corn.' Bent over an imaginary urn, grinding imaginary corn, States eyed the wall motto furtively. If you wanted to use phony dice, slip them to a sucker and let the sucker make the passes. Ride with him for a half a dozen passes, then grab your hat and let the sucker try talking his own way out. Let the suckers take the beatings. That's what suckers were for.

'All right, boys! Papooses now!'

'It makes them ferget their little troubles,' the guard explained to the ladies.

The boys bowed their heads to their knees and murmured:

'Sleep, little Indian, safe from harm  
Daddy's a-hunting the wild fawn.'

'Daddy's a-huntin' a wild skirt is all,' States offered under his breath. Silly Louie's hands flew to his mouth; when Louie started giggling he couldn't stop. The piano paused and the guard's earnest voice dropped discreetly; then everything stopped but the papooses' persistent murmuring. They rose heavily, one by one, and began a disordered out-of-tune clomping, toothbrushes bobbing, and went on clomping bravely, to minimize Louie's irrepressible tittering.

'Stop! Hiawatha! Stop! Come here!' The pianiste was plainly outraged.

Silly Louie came to the edge of the stage, his hands holding his stomach. He turned his head away and regained his self-control only with an effort.

'What were you laughing at this time, Louis?'

'I tawt of somp'n *funny*.'

'"Thought," Louis, not "tawt."'

'Yes'm. I tawt of somp'n real *funny*.'

'Well, go back to your place and pay more attention to the play and less to Kaszuba. Or you can't be Hiawatha on Thanksgiving.' Then, to reproach them both with a single blow: 'I thought *you* could be depended upon, Louis.'

'It helps them ferget their little troubles,' the guard repeated vaguely. 'They're all lookin' forward to T'anksgiving'. He was an ageing Norwegian, with a heavy head and a paunch, who had been a truant officer until his legs had gone bad. Between illness and poverty, he felt, somehow, that the children had tricked him. During waking hours he controlled an impulse to strike out blindly at the sight of them; as though, by punishing one or two, he might get a bit of his own back. Although he never acknowledged this impulse to

himself, he dreamed persistently of triumphs over the children.

In such dreams he was often a distinguished jurist who sat sentencing children to incredible punishments: one night he sentenced an eight-year-old girl to hard labour for life for thumbing her nose at him. He announced her sentence with a rollicking disregard of her offence, then cursed her obscenely while, in the back rows, men and women applauded: they loved him for expressing the hatred and fear that they, secretly, had long shared toward the children.

'We let them keep their little toothbrushes when they leave for St Charles,' he said aloud to the ladies. Then he spied States sneering at the pianiste and called out sternly:

'Watch each other, boys! Not too close together!'

After the rehearsal the ladies signed the guest book in the chapel, under a motto that read:

### UNLESS ONE TRIES ONE CANNOT SUCCEED

and the pianiste herself observed, looking at the holy pictures on the walls, that she 'just couldn't see how *any* child could do anything *bad* after being in *here*.' The ageing guard said he didn't understand it either and hoped they'd all quit doing bad things pretty soon.

\*

After dark the boys lay in the dormitory and spoke in whispers. For it was Wednesday night and there were no lights on Wednesday and no speaking was permitted when there were no lights.

The cots in the dormitory were numbered in bright, bald tin, and the pillows lay, alternately, at the foot and at the head of each cot. Thus each boy slept facing his neighbour's feet, the even-numbered ones with their feet to the wall and the odd-numbered ones with their feet to the aisle.

'I'd like t' be a paratrooper 'n just fly around,' Silly Louie was saying dreamily to himself.



'If you ever catch more'n one finger,' States cautioned him hoarsely, 'play ball with the cops – 'cause if you cop a plea fer the one you got caught in, when you done yer stretch they'll show up with dew process, 'an that's when they make you stand sep'rate trial fer the ones you didn't get caught on. You oughta cop a plea fer all of 'em in the first place. It don't take no more time 'n you get 'em all settled fer keeps. Now it don't make no diff'rence,' States went on gravely, 'whether your rod is loaded or not – you'll do time fer havin' crim'nal intent all the same. The only diff is, if your rod is loaded you get a chance t' do it in the pen 'stead of the workie, 'n that's where you get all the breaks. Down there you do it on yer ear 'n no trouble a-tall. You gotta watch out fer yourself these days.'

'I wouldn't want t' carry no rod though,' Silly Louie confessed. 'I want t' be a paratrooper 'n just fly around.'

States dismissed Louie's flighty ambitions. 'Awright then, so you're a strong-arm merchant instead. You go in fer raw-jaw 'n mayhem, Louie – like Commandos. Then you know what you do if you catch a finger?'

Silly Louie didn't know that either. Silly Louie didn't know anything.

'Well then I'll tell you. You plead D. & D. That's drunk 'n disorderly. Say you're drunk 'n fightin'. It's like malicious mischief too, sort of. Catch on? Get it, you?'

Poor Louie did not answer. He had dropped off to sleep.

States continued his conversation with himself, reviewing all the angles in his mind, brushing up on his law, planning for his post-war future. He heard the passing of the Ogden Avenue cars and the coughing of a city dredge down Roosevelt Road. Heard the endless crying of a freight train going somewhere all night long. And all the sounds of night seemed like sounds going always away from home, all night.

'Always use a blue-steel,' he warned himself hurriedly, thinking and planning fast now to keep down the fear of the night and the streets rising in him. 'They can see the nickel-plate kind in the dark. Them .38 Policemen's Specials is the'

best; but with the nickel-plate kind – that's how you wind up with your little toes curled up in a ditch when they see it in the dark.'

He felt himself growing sleepy, and, with his last waking thoughts, promised himself happier times: 'When I get t' St Charles,' he assured himself, 'I'm gonna learn up somp'n new every day awright. When I come out I'll be like a Com-mando all on my own. I'll be my own army 'n then they all better look out.'

Silly Louie tittered softly in his sleep, as though he were dreaming that States had to be Hiawatha, instead of himself, on Thanksgiving Day.

# LEWIS THOMPSON

## *TWO POEMS*

### I

#### *BENARES*

PURE winter sun, the lyric, limpid light –  
Boats red and white upon the dancing wave  
Lacing a ripple net of swarming fire.  
Sheathed in incessant lightnings as he bathes,  
A jasper boy echoes the sparkling air,  
The laughing mirror of water and of wind.

And as the northern cold hardens in sheaves  
Of crystal creaking like hyacinth, the bright  
Fathomless atmosphere, tuned above sound  
By countless sparking facets' interplay,  
Builds like the centre of a gem a spire  
Crisper than frost and richer than a crown,  
A carven pinnacle to house a god.

Giant causeways bear his immeasurable gait,  
The implacable dancer lighted in all eyes. –  
Dark with excess of splendour, like a flame  
Transparent in the sun; bull-dense, adroit  
With adamant joy; his drenching gaze  
Chilling with rapture whom it lights upon;  
Pure calm and pure caprice – brute meteor  
Blinding at noon the pure ethereal blaze.

## II

*BITTERNESS ALL*

BITTERNESS all, and yet all bitterness  
Is but our zeal, our prowess, our desert  
For the unceasing nectar of the heart.  
It is not pride, then, that will not confess,  
Play out and profit by, not even observe,  
That all our life is tragic innocence,  
But counters pain with its own violence:  
It is not pride and not despair, but love.

## ALAN ROSS

### *BASRA: EXPERIMENT WITH OIL*

OILWELLS and palms ; the silver tassels of pylons ; dhows adrift on olive and gilded water, like carcasses of birds whose wings are blown into sails ; banks of buffalo testing the sluggish current ; boats embedded in reeds, with patches of startling green round the trunks of the date-trees – round all these the afternoon sinks and curdles, a fringed ochre-stained landscape of junk.

Villages of mud, like plasticine models, are clamped on to leaking shores, where for miles only flatness exudes sumptuous avenues of dirt, and the skyline is stamped with the frescoing smoke of the docks. Heavily, broods of pelican and crane take off from the marshes, while beyond them, aeroplanes come in over wheatfields in flood. Now they've found oil, cracked smiles in the desert break through the gravel ; steel-drills, like flowers, grow adjacent to mud ; and only unworldly griefs are at stake.



# THE CRITICAL VIEW

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T. C. WORSLEY

## *SLEEPY PEARS: SOME NEW PLAYS* OF 1948

‘What I’m always on the look-out for – mostly in vain – is some attempt to state in one form or other the myth of our time. Do you see any signs of that in the theatre?’ This question was put to me the other day by a publisher and editor who keeps his hand pretty firmly on the literary pulse; and it left me gaping. Not that it isn’t a reasonable enough question to ask, and not that there oughtn’t to be one playwright, one play, or one part of some play that could be pointed to as an answer. No, I gaped because the experience of six months’ regular theatre-going has been to make me almost forget that such questions can be asked. My standard, anyhow, by now is immeasurably lower than anything that this question implies. Can I remember (I found myself substituting these questions) can I remember one character invented by a playwright in a new play in the last six months that was ‘absolutely modern’, or that was even distinctively original, that wasn’t drawn more or less whole out of the theatrical box? Or any situation in any play that has been genuinely fresh? Or any play that has given the impression of being the utterance of a person speaking a personal language instead of the every-day rubbed-at-the-edges common coin?

Questions like these, of course, by-pass whole sections of the theatre’s activities which a plain survey would have to take account of. A large proportion of acting and production talent will go, in any period, into old plays; and Michael

Benthall's production of *Hamlet* at Stratford, Sonia Dresdel and André Morell in Krug's *The Break Up*, Robert Helpmann as Shylock, Miss Mary Morris in Pirandello's *As You Desire Me*, and Lucie Mannheim in *Rosmersholm* – these I shall certainly remember from the first half of 1948. But the theatre would, I suggest, soon go dead if it took stock of itself only in terms of its revivals, or even *only* in terms of acting and producing. Naturally actors look first for a good part – and rightly. Bernard Shaw, when he was trying to force his way in, used to tell the actor-managers that they would have to accept him sooner or later; he wrote such good parts. Another common standard of judgement among stage people is implied in their question: 'Is it good theatre?' And this, too, is a proper inquiry; for what is not 'good theatre' is not a good play. But the reverse of this is far from true. The phrase is most often employed not as a question but as an excuse.

Whatever producers and actors may say, I am certain that the health of the theatre depends on the current of contemporary plays flowing through it; and the prosperity of the theatre at any time can be measured not by the number of people who go to see the Old Vic, nor the number of companies who take Sheridan and Shakespeare to the miners (admirable activity though this may be), but by the quality of the new plays being written and produced. It is in that conviction that I survey the new plays in the first half of 1948, and leave aside both the revivals and the conventional commercial pieces which are as necessary a part of theatrical activity as the ready-made novels in a twopenny fiction library.

The Mask Theatre is probably the most adventurous of the managements in London production at the moment. This is a non-profit-making group, under intelligent direction and with a very lively open-minded producer in Mr Michael McGowan. They won a great (and deserved) success with *The Linden Tree* and used the resources they had built up by it on two further plays, neither of which caught on. One

perhaps deservedly, the other not. One may suppose that the Mask Theatre chose as one of their plays *The Hidden Years* not because it was a workmanlike play by a new author – there are quite a lot of them about – but because it had an unconventional theme, the schoolboy sentimental friendship. But apart from the subject it was a conventional play with conventional characters and a conventional, positively out-of-date, treatment of its unconventional theme. The other Mask Theatre production deserved much more support than it got. Bridget Boland's *Cockpit* was certainly one of the two most interesting English plays produced in this half year. Once again, however, the interest lay neither in the characters nor the text. It lay in the technique, an extension of the 'Living Newspaper' which had been successfully experimented with during the war. *Cockpit* brought alive in a very vivid and exciting way the problem of the 'displaced persons' (that dehydrating phrase!) of Europe. A camp of them were imagined to be installed under a British officer and his sergeant in a theatre, and it was the very theatre from which we were watching it, with the curtain up, props littering the stage, groups of refugees in the boxes, circle, the bars and the passages. Thus we, the audience, were identified with the refugees, were harangued and ordered about and appealed to by the harassed officer vainly trying to get some discipline and community sense into a parcel of bad-tempered fractions. Then came rumours of plague breaking out. The fractions knit: order appeared: we pulled together. But only as long as the danger lasted; as soon as it passed, unity was dissipated. It was an excitingly handled piece and it should for its sheer entertainment, for its stirring and twisting and re-arranging of our feelings for the realities, have been better supported. On the other hand the material itself was only on the level of journalism. The British officer was a pale character, the sergeant a stage one, and the foreigners (except for the good comic stage-manager) were hardly even sketched. They argued as representatives of viewpoints, not as human beings.

Apart from *Cockpit* what else has there been which could claim serious attention? Miss Elizabeth Bowen's *Castle Anna*, in which she collaborated with Mr John Perry? This was one of the disappointments; it was ordinary, without any of the Bowen magic—and not even very satisfactory on its own level. *The Gioconda Smile*? Mr Huxley's dramatisation of his own *Conte* ruined the story but made an entertaining evening of melodrama. As a play it was in two (if not more) distinct parts which never came together or reinforced one another. The patch of Perennial Philosophy which he sewed on simply showed up as a patch all the way through. There seemed hardly to have been an attempt at invisible mending. What about *The Indifferent Shepherd* by Mr Peter Ustinov? Certainly there was some clear neat writing in this play, a use of language that was pointed, alive and witty, with occasional bursts of gross over-writing. And the hesitant parson, with his over-tender and inefficient conscience (so admirably portrayed by Mr Francis Lister) was a sketch towards a fresh conception for the stage. The play was alive whenever his conflict with the harder-headed, practical Chaplain was in view. But it misfired in its machinery, its story, its myth. The slavey driven to attempting suicide because of an illegitimate child and the final reconciliation between Vicar and wife, with the Vicar's sin embodied in a bouncing illegitimate niece – all this is false and stagey in the worst sense. But the vitality that was there in this play leads one still to wonder and hope about Mr Ustinov. When he has finally finished spinning like a top, so that he seems to be facing in all directions at once, and is as likely to dart out in one direction as another – where *will* he come out?

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Another group, a willing survival in our changed climate, is the socialist realist group, whose major representatives have been *The Gorbals Story* and *No Trees in the Street*. It is too late in the day now to pick up with them the argument we finished in 1939. In any case there is no convincing them.

All one can record is that Mr. Robert McLeish, the author of *The Gorbals Story*, is a promising writer, strongly influenced by O'Casey yet with a good vein of comedy: and that Mr. Ted Willis has done interesting work at The Unity. For the moment they must be regarded simply as casualties – promising casualties – so long as they remain infected with this particular brand of political rigor.

The single play that gave us the unique personal voice was *The Lady's Not for Burning* by Mr Christopher Fry which the Arts Theatre Club put on for a month. Mr Fry is a true poet. His images dazzle and flash in every line and by themselves they make an evening for those who can enjoy the intoxication of words. But he has not yet, it seems to me, found a myth with which to express himself. As a play *The Lady's Not For Burning* breaks down because it lacks a real thread of development. The two lovers, the man who wants to die and the lady who doesn't, both discover a new meaning in life in each other, but this doesn't seem to amount in the end to anything very much more than the ordinary boy-gets-girl. Poets commonly find their subjects where prose writers tend to invent theirs. Mr Fry must search for his equivalent of Plutarch.

So we come to the Americans who have sent us at least three plays which qualify for attention. *All My Sons* and *The Glass Menagerie*, the two which have gained high critical praise in America, remind me of sleepy pears: the kind you may see in a barrow, looking very sleek as to the skin and plumped out as to their flesh – only, when you bite them you find the inside is grey and 'off'. The smart appearance comes from a technical skill quite markedly in advance of ours. *All My Sons* is a straight, post-Ibsen, well-made play. We are introduced to a situation which looks happy enough on the surface; but a wave is turning over and this turn-over is held up and prolonged while the past gradually reveals itself – so that when the wave finally breaks it crashes with all the force of an unravelling past over the heads of the present. There is a certain mechanicalness now about this



method of telling a stage story; perhaps it would be better used as a contributory element rather than the whole machinery. Certainly *All My Sons* is extremely taut; the situations that unravel themselves one after the other make very 'good theatre'. But the pear, I submit, was sleepy. The characters were particularly ill-drawn; the father loved his son and *for that reason* allowed his factory to send out airplane engines which he knew to be faulty and, then, when this was discovered, allowed his managing director, the father of his eldest son's girl-friend, to take the rap for him. Such things doubtless have happened and will happen again. But the man who does them must have a flaw in his moral sense, a flaw which surely must have made itself known to the people around him before these two spectacular incidents. They couldn't, could they, be quite so taken by surprise? Linked with this is the fact that the motivation of this particularly mean crime is appallingly weak. It is put, in the play, simply on his love for his son and his determination to guarantee him a future. This ensures a number of those 'dramatic' parent-and-child scenes which the Americans seem to love. Personally, I found these for the most part phoney; they had, of course, to be overdone in proportion to the insufficiency of the motivation. Nor were the other characters any better drawn; the son was talked of by his friends as 'an idealist' but he wasn't presented as one, unless over-fond smiling at Pop's apparent good-nature is a form of idealism. As for Momma, moaning round like a cat, convinced that her elder son was still alive - well, her misery could have been dispelled instantly by the girl-friend who had incontrovertible evidence to the contrary - evidence which she held up to the very end for no other consideration except that of an effective last act curtain. Sentimentality is when an author tries to make us feel more than his situation justifies.

*The Glass Menagerie* technically has polish too. The technique is in the new American, non-realistic idiom, derived from expressionist techniques. But this is a mere popularisa-

tion of expressionism, expressionism watered down to meet the middle-brows. The narrator 'remembers' his past and by the use of spots and black-outs, a series of incidents from that past, not necessarily very closely knit, is presented, linked by his narration. 'I am a poet with a poet's weakness symbols," the narrator announces to us. To me, a most suspect line: symbols are a poet's equipment not his weakness and in this false humility I scent an attempt to ingratiate himself. Of the story there is nothing to say. There isn't one: only an extended incident. For we are meant to react to *The Glass Menagerie* not as we would to a stringent play but as we do to poetry. This the whole ritualistic approach makes clear. But what *exactly* are we meant to feel? A sort of nostalgia or regret, a pain, a vague quality of the touching? There was for me nothing precise in the play's statement and good poetry *is* precise. It organises one's feelings along certain clearly defined, specified lines. It is bad poetry that evokes vague shapes and outlines of feeling, a mere range of emotion within which one can take one's choice. The symbols sound to me altogether too blurred: and the prose of the narrator top-heavy with dying falls. Again, was a sort of amber-lit nostalgia or regret, however vague, the appropriate emotion to engage in us about the situation which the poet produced? A devouring mother who has done her best to ruin three lives. The two men's lives are not ruined only because they have been able to get away; but they have had to leave behind them the crippled girl who can't. This situation is one which I feel called for a far more complicated treatment than anything Mr Williams produced, if sentimentality was to be avoided. It is only fair to add, however, that many people did find poetry in this play that I missed.

It might, I suppose, be argued that the young girl from Clifford Odets' *Rocket to the Moon* is also sentimental. But in her own way she gives as many back-handers to sentiment as does her prototype Hilda Wangel in *The Master Builder* (from whom she is obviously derived). This play I bracket

with Sartre's *Crime Passionel* as the best play in the past six months. It failed rather lamentably here largely because it wasn't possible to cast it properly; and the production was frankly mis-handled. But it seemed to me – and I saw it three times – to be a play of real quality. It is composed in a sharply individual language, the rhythm of which could only be properly reproduced by the Jewish Bronx actors for whom it was originally written. It re-creates, with a horrifying vividness and a humane compassion, the dingy, soiled thing that urban living is for so many of its middle-aged victims – for whom the sad sexual mirage may be the only available alternative to the inescapably dreary. In contrast to them, the girl who represents the sexual mirage picks a path between them, still optimistic only because she is still young and feels so alive. Mr Clifford Odets' method is just the opposite of Mr Tennessee Williams'. Where Mr Williams encases a mild realistic incident in a reverent frame of symbols, Clifford Odets uses plain realistic frame-work for symbolic purposes. On the other hand, of course, Mr Odets is a highly experienced playwright, while *The Glass Menagerie* is Mr Williams' first full-length play. We shall doubtless know better what he is worth when we have seen his *Street-car Named Desire*.

The nearest we have got towards a statement of the myth of our time has been Sartre's *Crime Passionel*, which was put on by another enterprising group, The Company of Four (who first produced as well *Castle Anna* and *All My Sons*, and who, incidentally, are the first management to break away from the current tradition of dullness in theatrical poster advertising). But *Crime Passionel* is a statement – and a very exciting one – of the European rather than the English myth. For that we are still waiting, and if past experience is any guide the theatre will have to wait until it has appeared first in literature. Unless, that is, the current paper shortage continues and writers, tired of having to queue even in publishers' offices, turn towards the play as a possible medium. This would be an excellent thing, I think,

both for drama and literature. I seem to feel a danger of specialisation mounting, of the frontiers between contemporary drama and literature becoming too fixed and private. The traffic between the two should be absolutely free and very frequent. Indeed, this might be one way of hastening the renewal which we are all waiting for. It would be absurd to pretend to be able to guess what form any such revival would take. I only hazard a prophecy that we shall leave all forms of realism behind. As a movement in the last century realism certainly revived our tradition; but its drive is now almost exhausted and it produces only exhausted half-bodied works; in the theatre realism has an added drawback; it draws on only such a small proportion of the theatre's resources.

## ALAN PRYCE-JONES

### THE GEORGIAN POETS

Every few years the universe sloughs off a skin. Familiar objects become strange, old purposes irrelevant, extraordinary beauties timeworn overnight; and all because somebody paints a picture or somebody else writes a poem. So, although only fifteen years divide Day Lewis's *A Hope for Poetry* from Harold Monroe's *Some Contemporary Poets*, a difficult effort of adjustment has to be made before a younger generation can even understand what Monroe is trying to tell it; for in the years between 1920 and 1935 an old skin was cast, and with it went the whole conception of life implicit in Georgian poetry.

But what exactly *is* Georgian poetry? Its component parts are scattered about the five-volume anthology edited by Sir Edward Marsh between 1911 and 1922: an anthology which, to a great number of people who read it when they were young, stood out from others by marking a stage of advance in their own sensibility. There must be many, like myself, now about the turn of middle age, who chose these little books as a school prize – a welcome change from Napier's *Peninsular War* and Creasy's *Decisive Battles* – or accepted them as a Christmas present from a 'clever' cousin; many whose perspective of modern poetry still wears a faint dye from the colours, then so brilliant, of Sir Edward Marsh's careful choice. The names in the index behaved like dragon's teeth; they sprang up, similar but vigorous, in a field which had been deserted since the death of Tennyson. It was only later that we wondered why they, and no one else, had been elected; and then, on re-reading the prefaces, Sir Edward was not very helpful. In the first volume, he does not go beyond 'the belief that English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty'; he hopes to make his readers perceive 'that we are at the beginning of another



"Georgian period" which may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past'. Yet a dedication to Bridges gives the flyleaf a consoling air. There will be nothing explosive in the new age, it insinuates; the revolutionaries may be Decembrists, they will not be Reds.

Finally, it is Monro who offers the material for a definition. He tells how the anthology was originally suggested by Rupert Brooke, some time before the opening of the Poetry Bookshop in Devonshire Street and he goes on to observe that by the fourth volume (by 1919, that is) 'a tendency towards a *Georgian* manner is noticeable. Some of the writers are imitating each other in choice of subject, or treatment, or style. This volume, unlike the first, could not be taken for a haphazard selection from the poetry of the period. It is too like the compilation of a *Group*.'

The Group was formed by a process of poetic silage. Green crops of imagery, autobiographical detail, and good humour were made to ferment under applications of bitterness imposed by the sudden collapse of a safe and friendly Europe. The basic temper of the Georgians is that of Rupert Brooke's *Dining-Room Tea*:

I sang at heart, and talked, and ate  
 – a temper which was determinedly prepared to refer its darkest moments, even, to the Comic Muse; but upon that temper the war imposed an inconvenience so total that it gained a fresh dimension. For it was the inconvenience, not the tragedy, of war which at first inspired the mocking anger of Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon and, in his own way, D. H. Lawrence. And out of the five volumes of poetry which appear, superficially, as anonymous as strips of matter cut from a central block, it is the angry poets who first clamour for personal attention.

Let us say, then, that Georgian poetry came into existence only gradually, and burst surprisingly into flame under the burning glass of a world at war. Or we could call it the little quivering stump of sensibility left by the first great amputation in our time of leisure and prosperous calm. That, no

doubt, is one of the reasons why the Georgians fell into such disrepute during the Thirties. For the war left these poets dazed, and often, like all people struck by an unexpected calamity, frozen into absurd attitudes; it killed their friends, it shocked and frightened them very much; it cut at the roots of their self-esteem; it could be met with no inherited weapons of accepted efficacy, but only with the postures of defence. Faced with lightning attacks from a world which had hitherto seemed ever kindlier and more secure, the poets of 1919 were novices in a Ju-Jitsu school; knowing neither falls nor counters they fell down and hurt themselves with a regularity which can only too easily excite an uncharitable laugh.

When it comes to segregating the Georgian poets from their contemporaries, Sir Edward Marsh is more explicit. From his second volume he excluded Chesterton and Sturge Moore, among others, 'because they belong in fact to an earlier poetic generation'. At the time, no doubt, the same objection was applied to Yeats [of whom Monro wrote that by 1910 he 'had already published most of his best work']. Ezra Pound and the Imagists (apart from Lawrence), the Sitwells, Herbert Read, the Eliot of *Prufrock* and Aldous Huxley are disqualified among the young; Binyon and Belloc among their elders. On grounds of age, supposedly, Hardy is also omitted, although his *Moments of Vision*, which appeared in 1917 – the central year of the Georgian Poetry series – tackles and defeats most of Sir Edward Marsh's candidates on their own ground. So that we are left with a group which excludes equally the direct inheritance of tradition and the experimental minorities most aware of a need to renew the substance of English poetry. What is left may not seem to amount to much; it contains, however, in addition to work by poets such as Walter de la Mare and Edmund Blunden, who transcend the limits of group-writing (and therefore fit only incidentally into our scheme of Georgian poetry), some poetry of a kind which is at present particularly in need of rescue from oblivion: what may be called low-tension poetry.

This is a kind of verse which fulfils a particular English need. It may be compared to the English water-colour tradition which, in the manner of Anthony Devis, turns every landscape into a neat oblong, the colour of wood-smoke, upon which the trees and banks spill an orderly emotion of an easily-recognizable kind. Possibly some peasants look awestruck at a small waterfall or a handful of gentlewomen point out to one another the chapel on a rounded hillock. The object of such verse is to make a single and lucid statement, or to proceed syllogistically to a single conclusion, and it may be considered as the precise opposite of that poetry which aims at a magical diffusion of power through juxtapositions of symbolism and imagery.

To perceive what Georgian poetry is *not*, one need only look at the poems of Valéry being written at approximately the same time: poems which, if reduced to a syllogism, as, for example, M Julien Benda willingly reduces them, become comic.

J'ai vu bondir dans l'air amer

Les figures les plus profondes.

That is Valéry's profession. But M Benda doubts it very much. 'Si vous voulez dire qu'il pleut et êtes vraiment un écrivain, ne le dites pas avec clarté. Mieux: ne veuillez pas dire de ces choses simples qui commandent la clarté'. This ironical gloss put upon an aphorism of Valéry might have seemed an excellent joke to W. H. Davies or Wilfred Gibson, to J. C. Squire or Flecker. A proper marriage between *la clarté* and *les choses simples* represented to the Georgians the indisputable object of poetry, an object to which technical skills were applied in the hope of making it palatable; whereas to writers of the opposite school poetry was (and is) a matter, like ectoplasm, which must be procured at a high spiritual tension and under conditions only obtainable after rigorous training.

In questions of this kind exclusive opinions are seldom either right or wrong. And even if it be objected that the Georgians have very few *choses simples* to display which are not

better expressed by Bridges or Hardy, they are all the same worth an affectionate glance in search of pleasures forgotten.

Of these the most surprising lie in the work of John Freeman, an uneven poet rightly praised by Harold Monro for his serenity and gravity, but then omitted (except for a single poem) from Monro's excellent collection, *Twentieth Century Poetry*, and subsequently quite overlooked since his death in 1929.

Freeman is an odd figure. He lived by day the life of a successful business man and returned in the evening to write poetry in a singularly un-beautiful suburb. Memory recalls a shy, angular figure, spectacled, slow-speaking, remote from fashion or pretension of any kind; and the fate of the self-effacing has been his. Yet even a short acquaintance with the volume of *Collected Poems* published in 1928, or with the posthumous volume edited by Sir John Squire, makes the neglect into which he has fallen seem inexplicable. It might have been expected that *The Pigeons* alone – one of the most accomplished and moving poems written in his time – would have survived through the agency of the Apollo Society or the Third Programme, or that memory would have been revived by such poems, successful enough a generation ago, as *The New House*, or the best of his sonnets:

I am that creature and creator who  
Loosens and reins the waters of the sea,  
Forming the rocky marge anon anew.  
I stir the cold breasts of antiquity,  
And in the soft stone of the pyramid  
Move wormlike, and I flutter all those sands  
Whereunder lost and soundless time is hid.  
I shape the hills and valleys with these hands,  
And darken forests on their naked sides,  
And call the rivers from the vexing springs,  
And lead the blind winds into deserts strange.  
And in firm human bones the ill that hides  
Is mine, the fear that cries, the hope that sings.  
I am that creature and creator, Change.

*Choses simples*, if you like. Freeman has no hieratic airs; worse, perhaps, in the eyes of later critics, he has no pretension to wit. His muse is solemn, anxious, tuneable, and massive – qualities not much appreciated in conjunction. But out of his own faults, which are the faults of all low-tension poetry – a tendency to catalogues, reliance on poetic formulae, a rather uneasy combination of cosiness and melancholy – he knew how to pick the necessary moments which justify a slow and friendly reading. Nor should his prose, and in particular his excellent life of Herman Melville, be forgotten.

If we take the other poets of the fourth volume of *Georgian Poetry* as representative, their first impact is a painfully gentle one. The twin ghosts which hover over this landscape are those of Keats and Miss Muffet. One looks into page after page with an astonishment like that engendered by a *Studio Year-Book of Decorative Art* of the same period: there is very little difference between the inspiration which prompted Lascelles Abercrombie or John Drinkwater to verse and that which turned to embroidered and appliqué panels, stained glass depicting a bob-haired chorister walking towards his rickety, but celestial, city, or ‘Dryad’ furniture in painted wicker.

‘The scene is a bedchamber in a one-storied house. The walls consist of a few courses of huge irregular boulders roughly squared and fitted together; a thatched roof rises steeply from the back wall. In the centre of the back wall is a doorway opening on a garden and covered by two leather curtains; the chamber is partially hung with similar hangings stitched with bright wools ...’

these opening rubrics from Gordon Bottomley’s verse play, *King Lear’s Wife* (*Georgian Poetry*, Volume Two) set the note. It is a note of earnest communication, sometimes arch, sometimes correctly splendid, but hardly urgent. And yet under the Georgian crust is a constant lyric movement, so relaxed that it offends most of the concepts of poetry which have since become commonplace, but, unlike much of the



PORTRAITS OF  
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH PAINTERS



ROBERT MEDLEY



*Felix H. Man]*

JOHN CRAXTON



(Maurice Ambler

JOHN MINTON



*Felix H. Man]*

ROBERT COLQUHOUN





(Felix H. Man)

ROBERT MACBRYDE



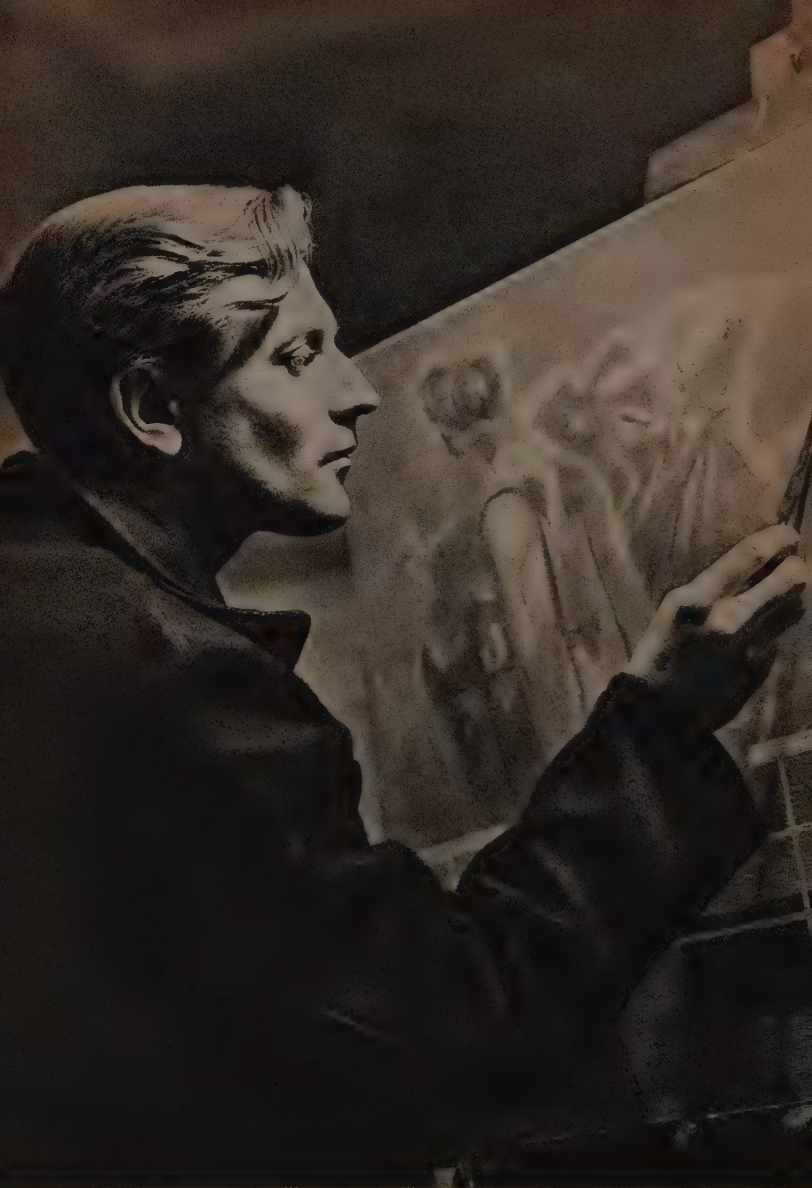


*Felix H. Man]*

KEITH VAUGHAN



LUCIEN FREUD



*Duncan Melvin]*

LEONARD ROSOMAN

The Family, 1948

DEREK HILL



Demolition near the Tate Gallery, 1948





Lord Berners grappling  
with his muse



OSBERT

Petersfield





Mr. Evelyn Waugh  
reacting strongly  
to the Century of  
the Common Man

LANCASTER



Bombed Port in Peloponnese





CAPRICCI

*Contemporary Italian Ballet by Milloss*



L'AVVENTURA DELLA MASCHERA (Decor and Costumes by Severini)

*Contemporary Italian Ballets by Milloss*

LA FOLLIA DI ORLANDO







*Mandrian]*

## M'SELLE ANGOT

Choreography by Leonide Massine  
Decor and Costumes by André Derain





The Sadlers Wells Ballet Company  
at The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

[Mandinian







Two Ladybirds pick-a-back with umbrella

JAN LE WITT

Grey Cliffs



secondary verse of the Thirties, nosing firmly towards a conclusive point, nevertheless.

From 1930 until very lately, the poet and the intellectual – to the public eye – offered an overlapping, a stereoscopic, view. The two ideas of poetry and intellect were interfused, so that poet and seer became almost synonymous terms and the function of poetry turned decisively to present and to interpret a personal vision. By a natural paradox, anti-intellectual, or Surrealist, poets intellectualized their art more energetically than anybody; in short, the making of poetry, by implication, has for some time been almost tantamount to the construction of an egocentric universe, unless the publication of Day Lewis's *Word Over All* was indeed, as seems possible, the portent of a recall to order.

The Georgians held the opposite position. Like the poets of Dodsley's (or any other eighteenth-century) Collection, they adopted a common attitude which aimed at percipience, not at intellectuality. They tried to make universally valid statements, not to cast runes; and since universal validity was their aim they had no particular fear of the obvious, so long as it could be salted by fresh metaphor or given the gravity, at least, of musical speech. Thus the mind, having no effort of focus imposed upon it, tends to slip away from their statements; it has been taught to expect something more strenuous of modern poetry, to have at hand all the textbooks of the moment, and to keep concentration alert by a regular series of syntactical battles.

Those poets, however, whose observation is really fine, whose language belongs to them alone, and who avoid that peculiar chirrup which is the weakness of the conventional Georgian (comparable to the Arthur Marshall note of exhortation which shrills down the 1930s) are certainly neglected. They have been left in the trough of the great nineteenth-century wave – since it is to the nineteenth century that most of them belong – and left, what is more, with the exception of Brooke and Flecker, unexamined. Except inside the quiet world of an occasional reader in sixth-form or provincial

outpost who tries to clutch at something up-to-date and gets it wrong, very little critical attention is given to-day to poets such as Ralph Hodgson, Squire or W. H. Davies. Perhaps the fact that the surface of their verse shows no sign of strain makes it suspect; their regular stanzas get swallowed down like cachets carrying their content smoothly with them and never touching the palate. Were the Georgians then simply writing because they liked writing? Or must the absence of footnotes quoting apposite statistics from Dr. Otto Neurath, scraps of case-book and comment, twigs from *The Golden Bough*, suggest a frivolous attitude to art? For whatever reason, they are half-forgotten. Half-forgotten also, perhaps, because so many of them seem to have been driven out of business shortly after the last of Sir Edward Marsh's volumes appeared. Robert Nichols, Robert Graves, Richard Hughes, Peter Quennell, Edward Shanks, Squire, Hodgson, Francis Brett Young, Martin Armstrong: a haphazard list, but rivetted together by a reluctance of the poetic faculty, or at any rate by the decision to publish poetry chiefly as a sideline to successes in other kinds of work.

Why? one asks. Why should a whole school of poets abandon their art together? Were they defeated by economics; silenced by powerful rivals, snubbed by the public, discouraged by a post-war England? Was it of choice or necessity that they turned themselves into novelists, journalists, editors, publishers? Is there, in every drawer, a volume of Last Poems tucked away waiting? Such questions cannot be answered. Undoubtedly the Georgians paid a heavy and immediate penalty for their general dislike of political and social stresses, their reluctance to abandon a world in which the birth of their Group coincided with the wonderful, crystalline, unendangered summer of 1911. But after a fresh lapse of time it is easy to set them again in perspective: to see how much pleasure is in them, and how much promise of the future we know; above all in quick exchanges between lyric impulse and deliberate greyness, as in Squire's *Meditation in Lamplight*:

O fearful, fearful Shadow,  
Kill me, let me die to escape the terror of thee!  
A tap. Come in! Oh, no, I am perfectly well,  
Only a little tired. ...

and, perhaps, in poems of place such as the same poet's  
*Winter Nightfall*:

The old yellow stucco  
Of the time of the Regent  
Is flaking and peeling:  
The rows of square windows  
In the straight yellow building  
Are empty and still;  
And the dusty dark evergreens  
Guarding the wicket  
Are draped with wet cobwebs,  
And above this poor wilderness  
Toneless and sombre  
Is the flat of the hill;

or the early poem of Blunden's which begins

By Quincey's moat the squandering village ends.

It is not by chance that Sir Edward Marsh is also a collector of pictures; for the best of Georgian poetry is all pictorial. When the poets come forward in person – in love, in mourning, breathing aspiration or despair – they generally strike a theatrical attitude out of key with their setting. It is then that they slip into their notorious use of the fag-ends of a romantic vocabulary. Frank Prewett issues a typical order:

Come girl, and embrace  
And ask no more I wed thee;

and our reaction is sharp. We know at once that nobody, in life or poetry, ever spoke like that. And even when the great emotion of the time – the war – is on the table, it is not the heroic or the angry poets who leave a scar on the memory,

but those whose exact statements are driven home by the force of compassionate insight (Wilfred Owen, incidentally, is not represented in these volumes).

In a wartime number of *New Writing and Daylight*, Henry Reed summed up one aspect of the disintegration of modern poetry in the statement that 'our critical standards have come to be based on memories, not of the "best that has been thought and said," but merely of the latest. With our example before them, we may confidently expect that in 1953 young writers will be reading only each other'. It would not lighten this dire prospect to suggest that they should turn back to a tradition which so evidently has done its work and died. All the same, the Georgians represent the last solid body of English poetry written for pleasure, and without didactic purpose. They tried to offer not greatness but delight. And sometimes they succeeded.



# JOHN W. ALDRIDGE

## THE NEW GENERATION OF AMERICAN WRITERS

*With Some Reflections on the Older Ones*

### 1

It should be time once again for the young men who write to wash their hands of America, to begin hopping cattle boats or any outbound tramp steamer that will take them away from this land of ignorance, unculture, and æsthetic starvation. Once again they should be flocking to Europe, staking out claims in Paris and the south of France, piling saucers on the tops of café tables, going to the bull fights in Spain; or, if Europe is still too badly wrecked to offer them a haven, flocking to the Big Sur, to Taos, or to Provincetown, there to detach themselves with almost equal completeness from American life and to write good books about sick America.

The critics, reviewers, scholars, and other weathermen of letters are keeping an expectant eye on the heavens and awaiting just this sort of change in the literary climate. They know that only the appearance of better books can break the present drought, and they believe, logically enough, that only through a repetition of history, some new pilgrimage to some artistic Holy Land, can these better books be written. They know the circumstances which contributed to the violent literary upheaval and fecundity of the twenties; and as they look about them they are able to find enough similarity between those circumstances and present ones to make the end they desire seem inevitable.

The country has again come through a major world war and is again experiencing the profoundly disturbing after-effects of war. The times are again right for a re-examination of values, and if need be, for a revolt from old values. Once

more there is business prosperity, and as luxury products reappear on the market it may reach proportions far exceeding the prosperity of the twenties. The young men should have, on an average, more money to-day – enough, with saving, to finance a trip. Since the war it has been easier to break into print than it has been for the past decade. In consequence, the books that the young men might write will have less chance of lying neglected in the bottoms of steamer trunks. Most significantly of all, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of men along with their families have been uprooted from home grounds and scattered all over the country and the world. The opportunities for absorbing foreign cultures, for finding stimulation in foreign intellectual movements have never been greater. The young men have once again the rare and invaluable advantage of a foreign perspective, of a point of reference from which to examine the civilisation of their own country.

If we read the critical histories and eyewitness accounts of the twenties; we find much the same factors listed as the major causes of the 'lostness' of its literary generation, and of their admirable creative productivity. Those earlier young men were also dissociated from place, uprooted from native grounds, brought into contact with foreign (specifically European) ideas, forced to exchange peace-time values for the more profligate values of war, and creatively and emotionally awakened by danger and the nearness of death.

Would it not be correct to assume then that, given such a similarity of experience, the young writers of to-day will produce a literature comparable to theirs? I, as one member of the new generation, believe not; and the factor which seems to me to outweigh all the similarities is inherent in a basic difference of attitude and response.

## 2

Most of the writers who began moving into Montparnasse in the early twenties had been through the war. In one

capacity or another, whether with the American Ambulance Services serving with the French, with the Red Cross Ambulance Sections on the Italian front, or in the various branches of the combat army after America entered the war, they had nearly all undergone the same experiences, had similar emotional responses, arrived at about the same conclusions. Their military careers, like their lives, followed a surprisingly identical pattern. Like most young men of their generation, they were deeply and sentimentally affected by the patriotic slogans and catchwords that are so much the vogue of wartime, and they left college and jobs to find, in what seemed a glorious adventure, relief from boredom and a cause worthy of belief. Behind them, as their transports moved out of the harbours of New York and Boston, they left conventional boyhoods in small towns and cities, conventional training in high schools and preparatory schools where they were equipped with the same attitudes, ignorances, and prejudices, and conventional furbishings in colleges and universities where they were allowed the same privileges, endowed with the same snobberies, exposed to the same English verse. Ahead of them lay Europe with its promises of love, excitement, freedom; the Europe they knew for its women, its paintings, its books, its Paris; the Europe they knew only from steamship folders, novels, and picture postcards.

What the war should have taught these young men it somehow failed to teach them. Although it took away their illusions, it did not destroy their capacity to enjoy disillusion. They fought in it and some of their friends died in it; yet they were still somehow capable of being thrilled by danger and the prospect of giving blood for their country, stricken to a fierce exaltation by the simple poignancy of death among the poppies, melted by the spectacle of love amid the ruins of a French château.

A fair explanation for their enjoyment of disillusion may perhaps be found in the nature of the war service of many of these men. Working as they did with units attached to

foreign armies, they were able to retain their status of American gentlemen volunteers and with it most of their civilian privileges. As strangers among strangers, they were treated with respect. They were outside the petty restrictions imposed upon the officers and men of a regular military organisation, and owing to the nature of their work and a relaxed, almost non-existent, discipline, they were able to mix in comparative freedom with the civilian population.

Out of such war experience grew what Malcolm Cowley, one of the most honest observers of the time, has called 'the spectatorial attitude'. In his book, *Exile's Return*, he tells how, while watching a column of men belonging to many Allied nationalities moving through a French village, he and other members of his ambulance unit felt that they 'could never be part of all this. The long parade of races was a spectacle which it was our privilege to survey, a special circus like the exhibition of Moroccan horsemen given for our benefit on the Fourth of July'. To such observers the war was something apart, a spectacle it was their 'privilege to survey'. In the words of a Dos Passos character, it wasn't a war, it was 'a goddam Cook's tour'. It was an exhibition in violence and destruction, a gigantic bull-fight one was privileged to view from the stands. And when it became a bit too rough or too bloody or just too dull, there were always new and exciting places to go, new and exciting drinks to sample, new and exciting girls to fall in love with.

This 'spectatorial attitude' was contagious; and while it proved to be excellent equipment for young writers, it served to sever more completely the ties that held them to the war and to their country. It served to carry toward completion the long process of deracination which had begun in their childhoods, in the standardisation of their customs and beliefs, and continued through their college years when each took on the stamp of pseudo-culture which made him indistinguishable from all the rest. Now in the middle of a war of which they were guests by courtesy of the management, infected with irresponsibility, danger, held to a pitch of excite-

ment that made their old lives seem impossibly dull and tiresome, they were indeed 'lost', lost from home, sanity, and themselves.

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From this sense of isolation, of thrilled but detached observance, it was easy for the young men to take the next logical step—active, conscious revolt and self-exile from a country which was neither gay enough nor cultured enough to deserve their presence. Conveniently, a formal philosophical structure for such sentiments had been shaping itself both before and during the war years in the writings of certain prominent social-literary critics of American life, among them H. L. Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks. For a number of years, these men had been expressing the gravest concern for the plight of the sensitive artist in a machine-made, standardised society. It seemed to them that life in America was tawdry, cheap, colourless, and given over to the exclusive worship of wealth and machinery; that for a young writer to do his best work in such a society was impossible. In 1921, Harold Stearns' symposium, *Civilization in the United States*, gave these attitudes detailed and scholarly expansion. The thirty intellectuals whom Stearns had gathered together examined in essay form as many phases of American life and came up with the same conclusions: life in America for the individual with creative talent is not worth living. If the young artist is to escape with his talent unimpaired, he must leave the country. He must, as Stearns urged in his essay, go to Europe where the creative life is still possible. To show that he meant it, Stearns left for France soon after his book was delivered to the publisher, and whether because of his example or not, the young men followed.

Most of us know the stories of what happened then. The process of exile was complete. The young men came to Paris. With their wives and children, cats and typewriters, they settled in flats and studios along the Left Bank and in the Latin Quarter. They took jobs as foreign correspondents for American newspapers, sent back social gossip and racing



news; wrote book reviews, magazine articles, and stories; bet on horses, gambled, borrowed, and begged; did anything to keep alive and to prolong the show. If we can believe the stories, they were drunk much of the time, travelled considerably, and had very many love affairs. They also managed to get an impressive amount of good writing done. The early work of Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Cummings, and others bear witness to the fact. Between times, when they were not drinking at the cafés, partying, writing, or making love, they talked a lot and did a certain amount of thinking. At about this time, some of them discovered Gertrude Stein, and she, in turn, discovered among them talents worthy of her guidance. It was she, perhaps more than any other, who taught them how to make the most of their 'lostness', how to develop, along with Sherwood Anderson, an idiom that would be true of their time and truly their own.

Then, as the new writing began to appear, new little magazines began springing up to accommodate it. Their titles, *Broom*, *Transition*, *This Quarter*, *Secession*, were indicative of their editorial policies. Everywhere the accent was on the new and different, the departure from old forms and techniques, the rebellion. The machinery of art was grinding away at full speed, turning out new morals and literary mannerisms as conventionalised, ironically enough, as those which they were intended to supplant. Then something in the mechanism snapped, and the machine began running down. Back home in Wall Street, among the debris of ticker tape and ruined fortunes, lay the remnants of a broken promise, the promise everybody had made to everybody else — that the show would go on for ever.

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With the end of the roaring business boom of the twenties came the end of the roaring exile of its artists. The small private incomes from securities, the monthly cheques from the folks, the publishers' advances toward the writing of the next book, were abruptly sliced in half; then, gradually, they

ceased coming altogether. Job contracts ran out and somehow failed to be renewed. For the first time the actors, escape-artists, clowns, and special guests whose sole function it was to be slightly amused were faced with the choice of stopping the show or starving. Actually, there was no choice; it had already been made for them. They began quietly packing their bags and drifting toward Marseilles and Cherbourg.

A few chose to remain, the ones whose investments in Paradise had grown too large to abandon. Harold Stearns grimly stuck it out and was making the rounds of the cafés in search of his missing friends years after the friends had gone home. He took to wearing borrowed clothes and making bad bets on the horses. He became ill and for long periods was painfully and lonesomely blind. His story in his autobiography, *Streets I Know*, is the story of the end of an era and of one man's realisation, too late, of his own folly. When compared with his bitter indictment of America in *Civilization in the United States* it becomes sad, embarrassing reading. One wishes that a better, more dignified end might have come to a man who felt so deeply and who wrote so well, and to a time which promised so much, gave only a little less than it promised, and made so much difference in our lives.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the expatriate era died solely because of the collapse of the economic system upon which it was based. It died as well because its ideals were fully and elaborately exploited and found wanting. The Lost Generation learned the hard way that the extremes of art and life lead only to spiritual bankruptcy and physical suicide. The exile which had begun as an escape from the sterility of the American Waste Land and as a self-styled grace period for young American talent ended in another and greater sterility and in a blind alley for that talent. The ways of adventure, dream, and calculated futility that promised escape from middle-class mediocrity led instead to fanaticism, creative impotence, and anarchy. The extreme of

art led to the negation of art, and the extreme of life led to death.

The attitudes toward American life which had helped to form the Lost Generation could not long remain tenable after its members were forced to abandon their exile and, for better or worse, to find themselves. The country to which they returned might be colourless, materialistic, and stupid, but they had to make the best of it. There was nowhere else to go.

## 3

I have said that the main difference between the Lost Generation and the present generation is a difference of attitude and response, that while the physical circumstances of their experience are similar, the effects upon them of that experience differ radically. Perhaps there is still another difference. Perhaps the very fact that their predecessors reacted as they did made it impossible for this generation to react similarly.

Ours is a more knowledgeable time, certainly, and in many ways a more cynical one. Young men to-day are terribly aware, and in comparison with those who set out, with the eagerness of innocent boys, to save the world for democracy they seem terribly old. The illusions they might have had about war were blessedly lost for them twenty years before. They had no need for glorious adventure or relief from boredom. Their lives, as far back as they could remember, had been spent in a world continually at war with itself, in an economic order that fluctuated from dizzy prosperity to the most abject depression. They could remember nothing but domestic unrest, fumblings at peace conferences, Asiatic invasions, and South American revolutions. They came to consciousness in the midst of breadlines, strikes, and milk riots. The generation before them found itself lost in a world it had never made. They could never be lost because the world had never been theirs.

And so they went to war. Strangely, they did not go cynically as they very well might have done, but with determination. They went believing that the world was a mess and that war was a terrible means of doing something about it. They went because they had no choice but to go and because whatever hope there might be for a future depended upon their going.

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Those who went to Europe found exactly what they expected to find. The travel folders had been out-dated before they finished high school. The novels all concerned a Europe that might as well have never been. They found themselves in a place stripped of gaiety and romance. The picturesque little villages were in ruins; the girls were not lovely nor very eager; the wine was gone. Whatever hopes some of them might have had of seeing the country, mixing with the civilian population, browsing in libraries and art galleries were stifled in a tightly-organized military system where no allowances were made for individual preferences and no one was treated as a gentleman. Most of them saw Paris from the back of a truck or the top of a tank, and they remember it as a momentary relief from the stiff enemy resistance they had been encountering, perhaps as a dejected and slightly threadbare city where they stopped just long enough for a shot of cognac. The rest of the time, it was cold and miserable. The young men were tired and dirty. They were afraid very often and pushed beyond the limits of fatigue. The spectacle of death was not touchingly poignant or exciting. Nobody looked on, nobody was faintly amused. The war was close and too real to be analysed or thought about. It was a nightmare that might some day end, that might somehow be lived through. With luck, someone might get home, and if he did, he was going to tell the truth. For the first time in history, Americans were close to the truth of war, and they saw it with the clearest, most matter-of-fact powers of observation any generation ever had.

And because they began to see the truth of war, the young men began to learn. They learned the things that the earlier

generation gave up so much of its youth, talent, and sanity to keep from learning. They learned that not only does war solve nothing but that it contributes to and aggravates the sickness of the world; that its values, either as values of art or of life, are not true or honest; and, most important of all, that there is no escape from oneself or from the defects of one's country. They saw that there is but one choice—to live in the world and accept the world—and that the religion of art, the expatriate movement, or any ideology that seeks to force a separation of art and life is not only intellectually untenable but physically impossible. They learned that art must always supplement life and draw its materials from life, and that life, whether in Europe or America, is worth living; indeed, must be lived if it is to produce a healthy and vital art.

The literature of the twenties had the vitality of negation and transition. It is good that it existed, for without it the literature of this generation would be obliged to do its job. But it was a literature written for the most part in the spirit of exile, and it has all the defects and limitations of that spirit. To-day many of the most important books of the twenties seem dated, oddly limited, and often childish. They do have important lessons to teach, however, lessons in form and technique and in the realistic presentation of experience, and they must be read, studied, and understood by the young writers who hope to improve on them. Their defects are equally important, and should be carefully examined if we are to profit by them.

## 4

It is difficult and a little embarrassing to re-read Hemingway to-day. One wonders how the terse language, the clear descriptive passages, and the explosive dialogue that once – not so long ago – seemed so impressively right and so distressingly infectious, can have become so suddenly stale, can be to us now, who once were so slavishly admiring, a trifle absurd. Is it because we have discovered what Hemingway



and his generation somehow failed to discover: that there is more to the world than can be expressed in monosyllables, that people do not spit their words out between clenched teeth, nor beat their environments into submission with their fists, nor live by an ethical code that admits only the emotions of brute courage, masculine assertiveness, and lust? Perhaps. It is certainly partly that. It is also partly because we realise now that Hemingway's is a severely limited world in which the motives of men are reduced to a simplicity our own perceptions will not allow us to approve. It is a world bound in the sensations of war. Its people exist by a jungle law and deify a pagan god. Only the fittest among them survive. They survive by virtue of their capacity for numbness and insensibility.

The Robert Cohns and the other weak are destroyed, go down disgracefully because they dare to admit their feelings. The Lady Bretts, the Jake Barneses, and the Lieutenant Henrys go on because they are smart enough to say nothing, hear nothing, know nothing, to insulate themselves with a good stiff drink, dope themselves with sex, relieve their emotions at bull fights, in wars, wherever blood is spilled. And the rest – the Harry Morgans, the Robert Jordans, and the Catherine Barkleys – are the luckiest of all. They die fighting. They are spared Jake Barnes's life of impotence, Lady Brett's boredom with sex, Lieutenant Henry's penalty for desertion. They go down swinging for a cause. Yet they are people who do not like to live and die this way. They would like to be different, but they lack the will power to make the attempt.

Their creator would like us to believe that beneath their hard exterior shells they are soft and yielding, that if things were better they would do more thinking. But the condition of their nervous systems makes thinking fatal, he seems to say. They are victims of a lousy deal and can't take any responsibility for what happens to them. It may be that Hemingway is really a sentimentalist who never quite grew up, whose growth was arrested by the war, and whose emotions could not function except under the stimulus of war.

But speculations as to the kind of writer he might have become, what he might have said, fade before the fact that he is a good writer, one of the best of his generation. What the young writers have learned from him they will make their own. But his characters and their talk, their conduct, and their ethics are no longer suitable models. They are not true of our time.

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The novels of Dos Passos are not likely to embarrass us to-day; they are more apt to be simply dull, a trifle tiresome. So much of what he had to say after *Three Soldiers* reads like case history, straight journalistic reporting of lives governed by an apathetic genie who beckons them to destruction. In his immense chronicle of the American scene, *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos manages to fashion a net of circumstantial evidence condemning enough to convict each of the characters after his own devil, and that devil, no matter what disguise it may seem to wear, is nearly always (as in Hemingway) inability to win mastery over self, and through self, over environment. The women in *U.S.A.* spend a lifetime in bed and are destroyed by having to take the consequences. The men begin life as grotesques, as caricatures of men, scramble after happiness for a time, and disappear finally into the maw of a world where endeavour is futile and happiness a bad dream. They are all people without dignity, and, in consequence, without passion or tragedy. Their metallic little lives are pointless and their mentalities childish.

If we are to believe that Dos Passos intended their experience to be taken as a serious commentary on the futility of human life, then we have a right to demand that his characters be endowed with sufficient substance for our sympathy and sufficient dignity for our despair. It is more likely, however, that they were meant to stand as human beings artistically derived from life. If this is the case, then it is Dos Passos himself who becomes the pawn of the times he attempted to depict; for what he gives us is, like the work of so many of his generation, not a true picture of an era but a

picture cut down and distorted to fit the current attitudes of his time—that life in America is not worth living, that all experience in which Americans have a part is tawdry, pointless, and dull.

At present it would seem safe to say that, while he remains a writer of excellence and a predecessor worthy of study, Dos Passos speaks out of an era long dead and from attitudes we cannot make compatible with our senses.

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Another writer who has been a major influence upon the younger generation is Scott Fitzgerald. Unlike Hemingway and Dos Passos, he has gained steadily in reputation, and today his best books are being re-read by young writers as models of good prose and novel form. Although much of his work now seems thin and sentimental, even synthetic, it retains a flavour and sparkle that give it charm and distinction. Fitzgerald's people, however trivial their motives may be, have depth and meaning. Their futility does not lie in their lack of moral strength but rather in a misdirection of their energies and ambition, in the pursuance of some end — wealth, perhaps, or social position, or Gatsby's romantic dream — which is really not worth the trouble. Their experience does not disgust us; it touches us to pity. We are sympathetic because their world gave them no better ideals to strive for, and we are struck by their inability to realise the emptiness of the ones they have. They are important because they do struggle and because they will not admit failure when they fail. Fitzgerald has been able to give them dignity and purpose, even if unworthy purpose, and a reason for being. While his criticism of American ideals of success and of the spiritual vacuity of the wealthy country-club set is sharply penetrating, he is willing to stick to his facts and able to avoid false notes of despair.

There are signs to indicate that in *The Last Tycoon*, his final book, Fitzgerald was very close to a solution of our most pressing artistic problem: how, in a world without heroes, it is possible to give meaning to life and the stature

of tragedy to man's misery. It is unfortunate that he did not live to finish it. He might have taught us a valuable lesson in presenting superficiality, civilised barbarism, and the modern struggle after false gods so that they seem genuinely significant aspects of to-day's dilemma.

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Thomas Wolfe, although younger and certainly not technically a member of the Lost Generation, was formed by many of the same circumstances. Traces of his influence, like Hemingway's, can still be found in the work of younger writers, and his effect upon their perception of the world, particularly upon their perception of youth in relation to the modern world, has been immense. Perhaps more than any other writer, Wolfe has helped to make 'lostness' fashionable. Products of his gigantic autobiographical novels are still to be found wandering the night-time streets of cities in search of 'the lost lane-end into heaven'. Others are still beating their fists bloody against the walls of furnished bedrooms. Now that individual loneliness is once more a modern occupational disease, the ranks of his followers are growing daily.

It is difficult to estimate Wolfe, to separate from our estimation of him the feeling he inspired in us when we were younger. Yet it is that feeling which becomes our surest means of estimating him, for it indicates the extent of his limitation as a writer. Wolfe spoke to the adolescent in us all. When we look to-day at his wild outpourings of language, his animal cries of joy and despair, and his uncontrolled assertions of life, we find that the spell is gone, that we are no longer touched. We now know why. We have outgrown our childhoods and Wolfe did not outgrow his. His rantings, now that we are more detached, seem petulant, and his poetry strikes us as unbearably nostalgic and sentimental.

We are able to see in Wolfe the raw materials of an artist, even a great artist, but the balance of reason is missing. We learn from him that emotion must be objectified, protest subtilised, and energy compressed by rigid exertion of the

will if literature is to be made. We learn, and with the learning we give up a youthful admiration, that like so many of his contemporaries Wolfe did not grow up, and that when he died, at thirty-eight, he had only just begun to reveal a promise of maturity.

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James Joyce is, in many respects, the greatest literary figure to come out of the Lost Generation. His profoundly original experimentation in fiction has deeply affected our literature; in fact it would be safe to say that he, more than any other writer, has been responsible for shaping a novel form unique to this century. Yet it is in Joyce's work that the attitudes of the artistic twenties receive the fullest, most elaborate expansion.

His *Ulysses* is constructed upon the themes of exile and despair; it is the repository of disgust, the buried temple of the religion of art. Its principal characters, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, typify respectively all the pallid, arrogant esthetes who ever lived and all the mediocre, frustrated men of business who were believed by Joyce and his younger colleagues to populate the modern earth. The book seems a massive, pedantic experiment in futility, a catalogue of the most decadent philosophies of its day. Its obscurity seems intentional and self-conscious, testifying to the immense conceit of a man who felt above explaining himself, who sought, as a gesture of supreme artistic contempt, to shut out all but the most astute reader from a full realisation of his meaning. It is only because we recognise in Joyce the unmistakable mark of genius that we are willing to excuse such an attitude. But we realise the danger of its influence upon his imitators and upon an entire artistic credo. *Ulysses* represents the extreme of the art-for-art's-sake doctrine, and it has encouraged and justified the antics of the perennial cults of that faith. Their members, lacking Joyce's scope of mind and greatness of talent, feel with him that the modern world is entirely too coarse for their sensibilities, too stunned by material considerations to appreciate their art. They believe that



comprehensibility in a work of art is a sure symptom of a mediocre talent and a superficial mind, and that the incomprehensible connotes the new and profound. Armed with such a view, they are able to foist upon their disciples work whose obscurity is taken for profundity, whose formlessness is taken for new form, and whose lack of subtlety is hidden effectively under a cloak of confusion. They, like Joyce, are too deep for the readers of books. And they are resigned to being misunderstood or even overlooked, and take comfort from the knowledge that such has always been the lot of the truly great. That Joyce, because of his integrity and detachment, was able to find in Stephen Dedalus – that partial self-portrait of the artist caught in the trap of his own intellectual crossword puzzle – a fit object for his cosmic sneer seems to have escaped his followers. It would seem most worthy of their notice.

Joyce's last book, *Finnegans Wake*, carries past absurdity the effects partially achieved in *Ulysses*. Here language is no longer sufficient for what Joyce has to say, and so he proceeds to destroy it in order that he will have to say nothing. While we busy ourselves with the *Key to Finnegans Wake* and the elaborate explanatory material which may afford us some understanding of the book, we are overwhelmed by feelings of pity and disgust. The spectacle of this man labouring heroically for eighteen years to warp language to the uses of his private confusion is the spectacle of a whole creative age short-circuiting itself to ruin.

Joyce speaks out of sterility and death. Most often he speaks brilliantly and well, but as with the others, we are forced always to remind ourselves of what he might have said if he had been willing to take upon himself the responsibility for making his great vision understandable.

Not very long ago it seemed to most of the young writers of to-day that the novelists of the twenties were presenting a

true picture of modern life; hence, a true picture not only of the past but of the present era as well. We grew up reading Hemingway, Dos Passos, Wolfe, and the others, and we absorbed what these men had to say about life before we were old enough or wise enough to check their statements against our own experience. We learned that nymphomania was the common sexual condition of modern woman; that love was at best merely sexual and at worst merely automatic; that drugs, drinks, lust, and violence afforded the only possible excitement and means of escape in a sterile, mechanical world; and that those who were not artists and writers, those who were business men, farmers, family men, and uneducated men, were stupid and inclined to be either viciously bigoted or mildly absurd.

It was only after we had matured a little more, lived for awhile, gone to war, and come to have more faith in our own powers of observation that we began to suspect these assumptions and to substitute others more truly our own. Nearly all the members of our generation are still in their twenties. We have not yet had time to develop fully or to get more than a good start on the work we intend to do. All of us are still learning the fundamentals of living and writing. There are, however, certain views and responses we share in common, that have grown out of our common experience of life in this country and in this era.

We know, for one thing, that hysteria and despair will not be the dominant moods of our work, just as they are not the dominant moods of our age. Although we have all, in one way or another, been psychologically shaken by the experience of war, we have not been destroyed or permanently deranged. We are aware of greater resources within us than the Lost Generation apparently possessed. We seem tougher and less likely to be hurt.

This is not insensitivity; it derives, rather, from a more mature, detached understanding of the forces which have shaped us and from a deeper understanding of ourselves. As far as we are concerned, the philosophy of disillusion is

dead. Exile is a blind alley. Sex, drink, and violence and the other opiates have been assimilated into life. They are no longer good for brave gestures in defiance of convention. Now there is no fixed standard to rebel against. Morals have become, in our time, strictly a private affair. Besides, the road from birth to death is, for us, strewn with far more than discarded contraceptives, gin bottles, and perpetually rumpled beds. Sex is a means of closer union, both physical and spiritual, in a confused and lonely world. Drink is no longer an end in itself, but a part of recreation. Violence angers us, makes us wish for greater human sanity.

Most often we are apt to feel trapped and numb, as if our emotions could no longer fully respond to our experience. One of our greatest problems seems to be individual loneliness, the difficulty of communicating with others – a problem akin to that with which Wolfe concerned himself. With our universe constantly expanding, constantly threatened with destruction, we seem to ask – more maturely than Wolfe, I trust – for closer human relations and spiritual harmony.

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A few of the books written, thus far, by members of our generation touch upon this problem. Like most early books, they are content to examine small segments of experience and single phases of American life. But within their limits, they explore the delicate intangibles of human feeling and response, and they reflect this time of deep inner unrest and its vague yearnings for a better, freer place.

Gore Vidal's *In a Yellow Wood* is in many ways representative. It is the account of a single day in the life of a young man who has experienced too much, given too much of himself to conventionality, and who realises too late that revolt, even for love is impossible. The cocoons of our identities have been wound too tightly. We cannot penetrate them or break free of them. Sex, for Vidal's young man, is not automatic nor is it tawdry. It is a living force of great beauty, and perhaps it is the truest means of escape from the prison of the self into union with another in love.

Although John Horne Burns cannot be classed among the youngest of the new writers, his first novel, *The Gallery*, belongs to their world, the only world they have been able to call their own. The people of *The Gallery* are those who saw the truth of war. Unlike the very young of Vidal's book, they were rooted and shaped in the time of peace, an age as worthlessly remote to them as the paleolithic; and when they are hurled to live or die into the war world of Africa and Italy, they cannot bear what they see. Louella, the Red Cross worker with a mission in life, is the victim of her smug and silly Girl Scoutism because the facts of her existence demand a kind of courage her ideals do not provide. Hal, the neurotic lieutenant, seeks an answer to the meaning of a war which has suddenly stripped away all meaning. He ends in a psychiatric ward believing himself Jesus Christ. Moe, the infantry platoon leader, goes out to die, seeing no meaning in his life or death, knowing that dying will make no difference whatever to him or the world. All either cling to identities which are no longer equal to their experience or lose themselves altogether. The people they were last week are no longer adequate to the people they must be to-day. Nothing in their lives prepared them for the chaos they are obliged to face and endure.

Burns sees truth with a ferocity of insight any age before ours would have found impossible to bear. But he sees hope also. With the destruction of our most cherished ideals – our belief in American honour, kindness, and nobility of purpose – we must return to the values of human dignity and love. With Vidal, he sees that love is the single unshakable truth left to us, the only condition in which beauty and decency have a chance of survival. And for a world bent upon suicide, it is the *only* chance.

The authors of both books show a new awareness of man's dignity. They are both certain that he will continually struggle toward complete self-realisation and equally certain that he will continually fail. They present the tragedy of his defeat but not despairingly. They do not urge him to escape

from a world too harsh. They ask, rather, that he meet his world and try to better his condition in it. As observers of the truth of their time, they know that there is no help for him, no place else for him to go. Whatever is done, he will have to do for himself.

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To be sure, we have not yet written anything to compare with the best books of the Lost Generation. Neither *In a Yellow Wood* nor *The Gallery* gives more than an intimation of the issues which must ultimately concern us. Nor do the others – Calder Willingham's *End As a Man*, Robert Lowry's *Casualty*, Thomas Heggen's *Mr. Roberts*. But there is reason to believe that the better books will come and that some of us will write them.

To-day literature is still in the muddle of war. It would seem that the events of the war years have hardened the creative arteries of some of our best older writers. Too many have lapsed into complete silence. The others of the literary infirm – the neurotic, aged, ostrich-minded, spiritually peeved, the sweet and the glad – are apparently still grinding out stuff to fill up the current fiction lists. Those who care for quality in books have just cause for worry. But the young men who write have not. They are neither frightened nor discouraged. They are trying to face reality and to write about it as well as they are able.

If they succeed, they will help matters. If they do not, they will not blame our lack of culture or our crude materialism. They will blame themselves. They know they can write as well here as anywhere. They know that the values they must have to be writers, they will find here or not at all. The exile is over. The young men, for better or worse, are home to stay.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Since this article was written, other novels by young American writers have appeared. Gore Vidal has published



*The City and The Pillar*, and Truman Capote's *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* introduced a brilliant, though narrow, talent; there have also been at least two more outstanding novels of the war and the aftermath – Norman Mailer's *The Naked and The Dead* and Merle Miller's *That Winter*. Nearly all of these show a technical proficiency that is remarkable in so young a group; almost any one of them reveals fewer lapses and roughnesses than the best novels of the twenties. Yet there is a new uneasiness about them; as if in having out-distanced the frame of negation and loss their authors were now seeking to establish a shaky affirmativeness and were uncertain of their ground.

*The City and The Pillar*, for example, suffers from Vidal's inability to assimilate the full implications of his theme into his art. The urgency of what he has to say causes him to spill over too often into something that reads more like pamphleteering than literary creation: and his characters are seldom less effectively drawn than when they are made to represent aspects of the social dilemma with which the novel is concerned. A similar weakness in *That Winter* led one critic to speak of it as a 'prefabricated novel' – one, that is, with parts which have not been 'created' but rather lifted whole from the storeroom, as it were, and forced into dubious context. *The Naked and The Dead*, on the other hand, is superbly realised creatively in its components but is somehow deficient in the entirety. It is ostensibly a protest against the fascist element in military ideology, but two-thirds of the way through Mailer seems to lose hold of his theme and to discover that his characters do not possess the ingredients of protest – as, indeed, they do not. The result is a disturbing half-failure, half-triumph made more disturbing by the fact that it conceals one of the most impressive accounts of modern warfare ever written. *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* is the most interesting stylistic departure made so far by a member of the new generation. Capote is, in fact, perhaps the best thing that has happened to our literature since Hemingway and the most powerful antidote since William

Faulkner to the tradition of numbness and understatement which Hemingway introduced. Unfortunately, there is little else that can be said for Capote at this stage of his development. His novel is weird, haunting, and unforgettable after the manner of most haunting things; but the world it presents is so hallucinatory, so grotesquely private, that it lacks all objective reference. We can admire it as we admire an exquisitely cut emerald; but we cannot identify the shadowy forms it reflects or ascertain its true value or usefulness.

# LINDEN HUDDLESTONE

## A N A P P R O A C H T O D Y L A N T H O M A S

‘Je vais dévoiler tous les mystères: mystères religieux ou naturels, mort, naissance, avenir, passé, cosmogonie, néant. Je suis maître en fantasmagories.’

—Arthur Rimbaud: *Nuit en Enfer*

### 1

There is little generally known about Dylan Thomas himself that might give any useful background to his work. He was born in Swansea in 1914 and received no formal education beyond the grammar-school stage. His short stories and the semi-autobiographical book *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* give an idea of how deeply his imagination is rooted in the life of South Wales. He worked in journalism for a time, but more recent jobs in films, as a writer of commentaries, and with the B.B.C., as a speaker of prose and verse, have influenced his development. The sounded word, especially in readings of his own work, has a new life through his lilting incisive speech. His broadcasts on memories of Christmas and the seaside gave an idea of how closely his verse is modelled on the naturally incantatory rhythms of his speech. His is poetry for the ear, and his elaborate pattern-poems give guides through the eye to the reader's voice.

Certainly an equal, possibly a greater gift, is his bravura of imagery. He uses his five senses to the full and colours all they bring with his own emotional reactions. Stephen Spender has remarked on this power and its danger (*Horizon* 76):

‘The obscurity of his early poems was due to the fact that they were poems written without any strong principle of selection to guide the reader through the thick images

and the loquacious sounds. They were often just collections of wonderful poetic insights, sustained by no unifying thought or experience behind them. The difficulty at once disappeared whenever there was a unifying theme, as in the well-known lines in memory of Ann Jones.'

Spender goes on to suggest that Thomas's war-time script-writing has given him that sense of a theme lacking before. Also, it will be noted, if a glance through the titles of individual poems in the latest volume *Deaths and Entrances* is made, that he is dealing with subjects of commoner experience. We have less far to go to meet him on his own ground: he has begun to meet us part way and has broadened the range of his ideas and images.

Difficulties with his poetry, as so often with that of contemporary poets, arise because of the originality of relationship of the experiences presented, and many of his poems seem to be records of the very processes of his imagination, with all their unexpectedness and crowding confusion. However in *Deaths and Entrances* some poems deal with simpler poetic experiences traditionally familiar, especially those of childhood, and one coming to read Thomas for the first time would do well to begin with these, rather than with the more complex treatment of the problems of adolescence in the earlier volumes.

## 2

The inter-relation of the several ages of man is a theme which Thomas has kept under constant review, and the particular focus in *Poem in October* and *Fern Hill* is on childhood. Sights and sounds in their youth-caught freshness are recalled by an evocative landscape. Thomas is on the ground of Traherne and Wordsworth, sharing an innocence unlost, yet conveying his thoughts in his own unmistakable voice, his own unexpected patterns of words:

'And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's  
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother  
Through the parables  
Of sunlight  
And the legends of the green chapels

And the twice told fields of infancy  
That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine.  
These were the woods the river the sea  
Where a boy  
In the listening  
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy  
To the trees and the stones and the fish and the tide.'

The clear-felt live quality of 'the true joy of the long dead child' is reborn in the man and reconciled with the mellower autumn of year and age; although in the poem *Fern Hill*, the lilt and swing of the lines, the exuberance of the animal child among the crowded minutiae of natural objects made larger than life when seen from a child's stature, yet change tone with the decline into age by the passage of time:

'And nothing I cared, at my skyblue trades, that time allows  
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs  
Before the children green and golden  
Follow him out of grace.'

This is a note often to be found in Thomas's work – 'Time held me green and dying' – and a particular use of the pathetic fallacy, 'the natural parallel', man considered in terms of inanimate nature, will be encountered again also.

With *The Conversation of Prayer* the reader moves further from himself and nearer to Thomas. A single reading is enough to show how deliberately and precisely the poem is constructed, how carefully its symbols are presented and contrasted: Child/Man; Quick/Dead; Love/Grief. There is balance: as the poem turns on the central question, 'Whom



shall they calm?', so each prayer 'turns on the quick and the dead'; life is balanced by death, and the logical beginning turns to the paradoxical ending. The situation superficially accepted is reversed: life is grief and death is love. The child will become the man and the cycle continue; the apparently safe entrance leads to a death, and the death is an unapparently pleasant entrance:

'the man on the stairs

To-night shall find no dying but alive and warm  
 In the fire of his care his love in the high room.  
 And the child not caring to whom he climbs his prayer  
 Shall drown in a grief as deep as his true grave.'

This statement of paradox is not always as clear in Thomas's work, but the fusion of the child/man relation has been important in it all along. The earlier volumes are almost entirely variations on the fundamental oneness of the elements of the birth-decay-death cycle, and myth in Thomas's poetry centres mainly round Eden and Golgotha:

'I know the legend  
 Of Adam and Eve is never for a second  
 Silent in my service'

he exclaims, and the embryo Christ speaks from the womb:

'As yet ungotten I did suffer;  
 The rack of dreams my lily bones  
 Did twist into a living cypher,  
 And flesh was snipped to cross the lines  
 Of gallow crosses on the liver  
 And brambles in the wringing brains'

W. H. Auden's statement in *New Year Letter* applies significantly to Thomas:

'womb  
 In English is a rhyme to tomb'

The final poem in *The Map of Love* summarises the position well:

‘In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched like a tailor  
Sewing a shroud for a journey  
By the light of the meat-eating sun’.

Origins and ends have for long in normal times been favourite topics of poetic meditation and philosophic speculation, but their forced juxtaposition in wartime has given an additional meeting-ground of experience to poet and reader – the more so because of the deeper encroachment of modern warfare into the life of the ordinary man. Thomas’s approach to this ground is in character: personal in the selection of themes, yet finding through the subjective impact the universal application. He indicates the manner and problems of this approach in the poem *Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire of a Child in London*. The refusal is not only a reluctance to make poetic capital out of suffering, but also, it seems, an inability to grasp the event completely. The background of the fire seems part of a vast system of ritual whose tremendous meaning cannot be sensed while it looms so near. Against it ‘the majesty and burning of the child’s death’ cannot be apprehended merely as one life lost and an elegy is inadequate to express the implicit significance of the event:

‘I shall not murder  
The mankind of her going with a grave truth  
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath  
With any further  
Elegy of innocence and youth.’

The phrase ‘mankind of her going’ indicates the wider loss, and the last line of the poem is more than fatalistic resignation:

‘After the first death there is no other.’

The ritual element is also present in the title poem *Deaths and Entrances*, where once again the prelude to death is connected with a whole series of paradoxical, mysterious and allegorical relationships. Death is the entrance to an unknowable world, the more sinister and terrifying because of its imminence ('But in that sleep of death what dreams may come ...'). Panic at possibilities mounts in this questioning state and culminates in a terrible image looming, then lost in the last darkness:

'One enemy of many who knows well  
 Your heart is luminous  
 In the watched dark, quivering through locks and caves,  
 Will pull the thunderbolts  
 To shut the sun, plunge, mount your darkened keys  
 And sear just riders back,  
 Until that one loved least  
 Looms the last Samson of your Zodiac.'

Face to face with the Power in the dark, nothing may be hidden by the deliberate locking-away of private shames, and there is no time left for shriving.

*Ceremony after a Fire Raid* has apparently grown out of the experience on which *Refusal to Mourn* was based, and which is now seen in perspective. First and actual, before the very eyes, is the life-death cycle short-circuited by flame:

'Among the street burned to tireless death  
 A child of a few hours  
 With its kneading mouth  
 Chained on the black breast of the grave  
 The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.'

Returned to the earth which gave it, the child becomes a phoenix symbol:

'Seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left',

and once more the 'legend of Adam and Eve' is invoked. Grief for the

'Child who was priest and servants  
Word, singers and tongue'

in the ceremony of its own death, is also grief for 'Man and woman undone', 'myselfes the grievors' who have brought on the wages of their sin. But the pyre of 'the slum of fire and the golden pavements laid in requiems' is swept away as

'The masses of the sea ...  
The masses of the infant-bearing sea  
Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever  
The sundering ultimate kingdom of Genesis' thunder.'

At the other extreme of man's existence, death unlocks the imprisoned spirit of an old man by the violence of its coming and frees the stored life force. Thomas develops the 'key' imagery again in this poem *Dawn Raid*:

'Tell his street on its back he stopped a sun  
And the craters of his eyes grew springshoots and fire  
When all the keys shot from the locks and rang. ...  
The morning is flying on the wings of his age  
And a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand.'

Thomas sets forth no deliberate and defined moral judgement on, or lesson from, the war, nor yet is he content merely to record his own emotions. Behind much of his recent poetry has been apparent some guiding principle, some sense of an important virtue, increasingly identifiable with the Christian attitude. This may have grown out of his anthropological treatment of the Christ legend and the usefulness of church ritual to him as myth, but it has resulted in a body of religious, though not devotional poetry. Involved in a struggle for expression he has found in it a means to beliefs of a more positive nature and has but recently been

able to speak from a newly and hardly won position. War and the events leading to it have enabled his rather fluid ideas to crystallise. *Holy Spring* is the most personal statement of this position: the war is seen as a darkness of winter in which the Light is at once more needed and more easily visible. Man, standing alone, is lifted to a brave stature by the times, if only as a tall figure on the brink of chaos:

‘When ... ruin and his causes  
Over the barbed and shooting sea assumed an army  
And swept into our wounds and houses  
I climb to greet the war in which I have no heart but only  
That one dark I owe my light.’

We may win through, but the value will have been in the striving:

‘But blessed be hail and upheaval  
That uncalm still it is sure alone to stand and sing  
Alone in the husk of man’s home. ...  
If only for a last time.’

The nearest Thomas has ever come to didactic verse is in the poem *There was a Saviour*, which affords one point of contact with poetry of Auden’s era, dissimilar as it is in style. There is a close parallel between the cry of poets for a ‘change of heart’ by the preceding generation and Thomas’s summary of the effect of that generation’s indifference and its subsequent forced action. Auden’s appeal to ‘Love the interest itself in thoughtless heaven’ was more of an appeal for political unity; Thomas’s, though this may be oversimplification, is an appeal to love in an implicitly Christian sense. The poem has a broader reference than to the 1940 when it was published, and successfully summarises a spiritual condition. The unique availability of Christ to men of true humility is emphasised in the striking opening lines:

‘There was a Saviour’  
Rarer than radium  
Commoner than water, crueller than truth.’



This has been denied by those of us who crucified him, and who are now alone in the dark. We, 'who could not cry On to the ground when a man died', who have failed to realize and to practise what he taught, now cringe in self-pity, and cry:

'for the little known fall  
For the drooping of homes  
That did not nurse our bones  
Brave deaths of only ones but never found.'

We learn a hard lesson, through the terror brought by our sins of omission and commission, before finding:

'exiled in us ... the soft  
Unclenched, armless, silk and rough love that breaks all  
rocks.'

3

Behind Thomas's present conception of love lies a complex record of a mind questioning the whole process of life itself – the 'maître en fantasmagories' at work. Marshall Stearns notes that he was obviously 'ridden by all the witches of a lonely adolescence'; and an important issue to the adolescent mind is its struggle to comprehend birth, love, sex and death as integral parts of a scheme of life. Thomas has been preoccupied with this almost to the point of obsession; indeed *18 Poems* (1934) tends to be a long rehearsal of 'the first declension of the flesh', the separate poems a series of documents for psychopathic analysis. It is, Spender remarked, 'the poetry of being rather than of thinking or knowing.' Thomas begins by considering the physical cycle of man – 'birth, copulation and death' – not in the social and contemporary sense of T. S. Eliot in *Sweeney Agonistes* but by enquiry into the eternal springs of life itself. This enquiry begins in the very womb, but as soon as life is, is death:

‘the womb  
Drives in a death as life leaks out’ (3)

The vigour of the verb associated with ‘death’ and the weakness of that with ‘life’ leave no doubt as to the emphasis. This poem (3) is an early statement of the theme of *The Conversation of Prayer* already examined:

‘the quick and the dead  
Move like two ghosts before the eye.  
A process in the weather of the world  
Turns ghost to ghost; each mothered child  
Sits in their double shade.’

The theme recurs again and again, and the natural quest is for the motivating force of the cycle; the imagery in which the first few poems are presented gives the clue, and the answer is blurred out in *Poem 8*:

‘This world is half the devil’s and my own,  
Daft with a drug that’s smoking in a girl.’

The dynamic principle of life is brought into startling relief until the whole universe is seen as motivated by the energy of sex. This gives man an almost physical unity with his world and its natural phenomena and objects:

‘I sent my creature scouting on the globe,  
That globe itself of hair and bone  
That, sewn to me by nerve and brain  
Had stringed my flask of matter to his rib.’ (2)

In a clarity of detail, by imagery which has an emotional impact similar to Donne’s intellectual impact, the poems are built up; complete they are less clear but the sum effect is of natural experiences twisted into a tortured cosmic vision of Life. The vision itself lays bare the object, but too often the process itself smothers the nakedness with a prodigality of

near-surrealist imagery which is confusing, as in the following stanza (after a direct and effective first line):

‘When like a running grave time tracks you down  
Your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs  
Love in her gear is slowly through the house  
Up naked stairs, a turtle in a hearse  
Hauled to the dome.’ (11)

Three better-known poems in the first volume indicate both method and approach. In the earlier *Poem in October* (10), Thomas discusses the relation of words to emotions:

‘Shut too in a tower of words  
My busy heart who shudders as she talks  
Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words.’

Natural elements spell out their message until:

‘The heart is drained that, spelling in the scurry  
Of chemic blood, warned of the coming fury’ –

the fury of winter which follows October. Similarly in *Poem* 1, Death is ‘summoned from a summer woman’ and the ‘dogdayed pulse’ becomes ‘the pulse of summer in the ice’. All moves toward winter and death:

‘But seasons must be challenged or they totter  
Into a chiming quarter  
Where, punctual as death, we ring the stars;  
There, in his night, the black-tongued bells  
The sleepy man of winter pulls. ...  
Here love’s damp muscle dries and dies.’

Every stage in growth is a stage towards death:

‘The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees  
Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose  
 My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. ...  
 And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind  
 How time has ticked a heaven round the stars' (5)

This is a pessimistic view, especially when applied to contemporary life (*Poem 9*) where there is a choice between two ways of love, equally unreal, like cinema pictures:

'We watch the show of shadows kiss or kill,  
 Flavoured of celluloid give love the lie.'

Living on the ideals of 'our eunuch dreams' is equally unproductive:

'This is the world: the lying likeness of  
 Our strips of stuff that tatter as we move  
 Loving and being loth;  
 The dream that kicks the buried from their sack  
 And lets their trash be honoured as the quick.'

However, through such disruption and negation of life assailed by the intimidations of sexual disgrace and the diabolically active forces of sin, there are signs that something positive has been found – though positive in the sense of a double-minus. Death is change, and there is a kind of creative energy in that change itself. As sex is the impelling force of the life-cycle, once complexes of frustration and disgrace are sublimated, this force becomes the tension between life and death in a series of poems complicated by an unusual use of the Bible as myth, as 'a cruel and crazy legend of man seen through the diabolical grimaces of the Welsh Bethel' (Francis Scarfe). Psychopathology learnt through Freud gives Thomas his plan of inquiry, and the chief subject of analysis is very certainly himself. Even when the 'I' of a poem appears to be Christ (e.g. *Poem 4*), it is nevertheless 'My Jack of Christ', and the theme is Man seen through a man:

'I would be tickled by the rub that is:  
Man be my metaphor.'

Sex is increasingly identified with Sin in the Old Testament sense, through the legend in which birth and original sin are universally connected – the book of Genesis, especially the story of Adam and Eve. This usage has already been noted in the 1946 volume and is prominent in the latter of *18 Poems*:

'In the beginning was the mounting fire  
That set alight the weathers from a spark,  
A three-eyed, red-eyed spark, blunt as a flower;  
Life rose and spouted from the rolling seas,  
Burst in the roots, pumped from the earth and rock  
The secret oils that drive the grass.' (13)

'The ribbed original of love' (13)

'Half of the fellow father as he doubles  
His sea-sucked Adam in the hollow hulk' (17)

These lines have an obvious undercurrent of sexual meaning, the double meaning emphasised by the possible puns, 'mounting' and 'doubles'. However, they tie up closely with imagery used throughout the volume.

Although *18 Poems* ends on a rather more productive note, the conflict and questioning is by no means ended, for the negation of death has not yet been overcome. In *25 Poems* the body, 'man iron', has to confront the soul, 'ghost in armour'. However, as will be expected after a reading of *18 Poems* the issues in the 1936 volume are not simply dual: for example, Thomas, like many contemporary poets, here examines the time problem, a complicating factor in the movement towards clarifying his position. Generally, this diffusion of elements throughout the book makes *25 Poems* difficult of approach, and the first poem itself although restating the theme of the preceding volume gives little clue to its own.



There is, however, behind the variety of 25 *Poems*, some sense of coördination after the early violence and disruption. This is not to say that a complete integration is achieved; rather there is an increased awareness, both of the complexity of life and of its elusiveness. With this latter quality Thomas seems more resigned, even sad, than angry, as he questions the universe:

‘What shall it tell me if a timeless insect  
Says the world wears away?’ (Page 14)

All through runs a predominantly negative commentary on the ‘civilized’ world which is still existing in the shadows of the Sin of Adam:

‘The wisemen tell me that the garden gods  
Twined good and evil on an eastern tree;  
And when the moon rose windily it was  
Black as the beast and paler than the cross.’  
(Page 8)

Power to do good or evil has fallen into the hands of harsh men without the heart’s compassion:

‘The hand that signed the paper felled a city ...  
A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;  
Hands have no tears to flow.’ (Page 33)

The misuse of great power is brought home as the poet sees the loved town and country of his childhood deserted by its people, hunted by Time and the times:

‘On Glamorgan’s hill  
As the green blooms ride upward, to the drive of time;  
Time, in a folly’s rider, like a countyman  
Drives forth my men, my children from the hanging south.’  
(Page 19)

The universe itself is no longer able to provide any answer

to questioning which is both satisfying and true. Since the loss by man of a child's innocence, to question at all is to bring a deliberate self-disillusionment as bitter as a child's first realization of death:

'Why silk is soft and the stone wounds  
The child shall question all his days,  
Why night-time rain and the breast's blood  
Both quench his thirst he'll have a black reply.'

(Page 23)

'I hear content, and "Be content"  
Ring like a handbell through the corridors,  
And "Know no answer" and I know  
No answer to the children's cry.'

(Page 24)

'But time has set its maggot on their track.  
Under the arc of the sky they are unsafe.  
What's never known is safest in this life.'

(Page 20)

There is no refuge here, though, for the nature of man and of his environment will not allow him to rest and be silent. The choice of being imprisoned within himself or of going out to meet the world of experiences confronts him; most men accept their journey in spite of, sometimes because of, its risks which are at once its gifts and challenges:

'Ears in this island hear  
The wind pass like a fire,  
Eyes in this island see  
Ships anchor off the bay.  
Shall I run to the ships  
With the wind in my hair,  
Or stay till the day I die  
And welcome no sailor?  
Ships, hold you poison or grapes?'

(Page 29)

For the poet it remains to keep alive his individual self, as he must always be to some extent the observer, recorder and



a progression; instead it revolves like a scratched gramophone recording, aimlessly reiterating man's shames until death stops it:

'Turn the sea-spindle lateral,  
The grooved land rotating, that the stylus of lightning  
Dazzle this face of voices on the moon-turned table,  
Let the wax disc babble  
Shames and the damp dishonours, the relic scraping.  
These are your year's recorders. The circular world stands  
still.'

(Page 4)

The one hope is that death may give scope to something beyond life, creative beyond the uncreative:

'Dust be your saviour under the conjured soil'.

'All-hollowed man wept for his white apparel', and his spirit might be master, after the 'shipwreck of muscle', after 'the slash of vision by the fin-green stubble'; the 'half-ghost in armour hold hard in death's corridor', immortal against the mortal 'man of leaves'.

Thomas has emphasised that man's search for the element of permanence in life was frustrated at the very beginning. The world of man began its downfalling through the sin of Adam by which came death. That Christ came to redeem that sin and to promise and justify a world beyond death is the simple orthodox-Christian belief; but in the sonnet-sequence at the end of *25 Poems* Thomas confounds, inextricably in all but a few places, Old Testament tribulation with New Testament salvation. The Christ story is seen not only as a conquering of death and a redemption of sin, but also as the focal point of history, 'the mountain minute' which brings eternity to man, killing time once killer of man. It also affects the reconciliation of physical realities (man, sex, death) with spiritual realities (God, love, life) into an integrated universe. Christ, conceived by, and born of a mortal woman, thus implicated in sex, is himself both victim and

conqueror of sin and death. Thus Thomas treats the story in a highly unorthodox way, and symbolic characters are introduced in bewildering profusion: the Trinity, Mary, the Paschal Lamb, Gabriel, Peter, Adam, Eve, Satan, Pharoah, Ishmael, Jonah, several signs of the Zodiac and Rip van Winkle. Many events in Bible history are also mentioned: the Nativity, the three days of Easter, the Annunciation, the Garden of Eden, the Creation, the Flood and the denial of Peter.

The sequence begins with a more than usually complex picture of the natural world with which man shares both sin, death and sexual dynamism:

‘Hairs of your head, then said the hollow agent,  
Are but the roots of nettles and of feathers  
Over these groundworks thrusting through a pavement  
And hemlock-headed in a wood of weathers’ (II)

*Sonnet III* opens with the conquest of time by the resurrection:

‘Rip of the Vaults, I took my marrow-ladle  
Out of the wrinkled undertaker’s van,  
And, Rip van Winkle from a timeless cradle  
Dipped me breast-deep in the descended bone’.

This is connected, not very clearly, with Eden and the birth of sex and sin (Adam-Lamb-Serpent):

‘Adám’s wether in a flock of horns,  
Butt of the tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve,  
Horned down with skullfoot and the skull of toes  
On thunderous pavements in the garden time.’

Thomas emphasises the violent sexual aspects of the Annunciation and Nativity: Gabriel appears to Mary in the guise of a cowboy-cardsharp:

‘And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel,  
From Jesu’s sleeve trumped up the King of spots,  
The sheath-decked jacks, queen with a shuffled heart.’ (V)



The horror and blood of the nativity attended by siren-midwives is set in comparison with the crucifixion (*Sonnet VI*):

‘The bagpipe-breasted ladies in the deadweed  
Blew out the blood gauze through the wound of manwax.’

*Sonnet VIII* has come to be regarded as a key poem in Thomas’s work. Francis Scarfe and Marshall Stearns have both analysed it in some detail, and although they disagree on minor interpretations the whole is clear enough. The first lines interpret the scene of the crucifixion, according to the grieving Mary. The Trinity, of which Mary is the mortal mother in this one moment changes the life of a slowly comprehending world. Christ transcends the body of man in its sexual (i.e. death-bringing) and therefore sinful function, and conquers time also, bringing alive the spirit existing through eternal love:

‘I by the tree of thieves, all glory’s sawbones  
Unsex the skeleton this mountain-minute  
And by this blowclock witness of the sun  
Suffer the heaven’s children through my heartbeat.’

Even here, Thomas has not reached a final equation. *Sonnet IX* deals with the effect on the contemporary and future world of the ‘resurrection in the desert’; and *Sonnet X* strikes an honest personal note, returning to the ‘scales of this twin world’, the duality of the first poem in the volume:

‘Time’s ship-racked gospel on the globe I balance.’

This duality is equated with Eden’s tree of good and evil knowledge. Atonement for Adam’s sin is not yet for ordinary man, who must trust in love and await the balance:

‘Green as beginning, let the garden diving  
Soar, with its two bark towers, to that Day  
When the worm builds with gold straws of venom  
My nest of mercies in the rude, red, tree.’

## 4

The remaining poems, consisting of those in *The Map of Love* (1939) and the most important in *Deaths and Entrances* have to be considered in the light of that movement towards a conception of love springing from the religious poems already examined. Thomas's work after 1936 is characterized by an increase in intensity of personal experience resulting in poems which bring further to light the unusual personality of the poet; also by a new perspective, opened partly by this deeper awareness, first of human relationships, later of universal analogies.

The poems in *The Map of Love* are very largely concerned with the event that has obviously been a major cause of this important personalization of experience – the birth of his child. In theme, they invite comparison with *From Feathers to Iron* (1931), the sequence by Cecil Day Lewis, but similarity ends with the theme and a contrast brings out clearly the special aspect of Thomas's treatment. Although Day Lewis has fears and misgivings to record:

‘Suppose that we, to-morrow or the next day,  
Came to an end –’

his main note, rising over a tender concern and wonder, is an expectant optimism, not only for joy of new life, but symbolically for political rebirth:

‘So turn, my comrades, turn,  
Like infants' eyes, like sunflowers, to the light.’

Thomas is nearest to Day Lewis's double meaning in *Poem 4: We Lying by Seasand*:

‘Bound by a sovereign strip, we lie,  
Watch yellow, wish for wind to blow away  
The strata of the shore and drown red rock;  
But wishes breed not, neither  
Can we fend off rock arrival’

— which is reminiscent of ‘As one who wanders into old workings’ (*From Feathers to Iron*, XII). On the other hand Day Lewis was perhaps nearer to Thomas’s attitude when he wrote in *Transitional Poem*, 13:

‘The man who nuzzles  
In a woman’s lap  
Burrows towards a night  
Too deep for puzzles’

Thomas’s earlier moves in the same direction have been noted, but the new nearness of the subject and his personal concern combine to make the scale of operations much larger, and the ‘contraries’ are presented with even greater emphasis, as in these verses on the child’s conception:

“His mother’s womb had a tongue that lapped up mud”  
Cried the topless, inchtaped lips from hank and hood  
In that bright anchorground where I lay lined,  
“A lizard darting with black venom’s thread  
Doubled, to fork him back, through the lockjaw bed  
And the breath-white curtained mouth of seed.”  
“See,” drummed the taut masks, “how the dead ascend:  
In the groin’s endless coil a man is tangled.”

These once-blind eyes have breathed a world of visions,  
The cauldron’s root through this once-rindless hand  
Turned like a tree, and tossed a burning bird;  
With loud, torn tooth and nail and cobweb drum  
The crumpled pocks fled past this ghost in bloom,  
And, mild as pardon from a cloud of pride,  
The terrible world my brother bares his skin’

(*Map of Love*: 2)

Thomas’s ‘style of sound’, as one critic has called it, has evolved, but is no less mannered than before; the symbolism remains complicated; the transition from image to image is still elliptical: but the at once personal and universal nature

of the subject matter itself results in a more powerful emotional effect on the reader. The mere prose meaning is less than ever important; more than ever the associations of various images in tension one with another. Images used for sexual relations and birth are generally of a violent character, strong male images of chance and destruction contrasted with softer female images of quiet beauty and permanence. This contrast of imagery does not, however, apply as a contrast between the man and the woman because there is a considerable mixing of characteristics between them, and between them and the child, typical of Thomas's way of thought:

'She makes for me a nettle's innocence  
And the silk pigeon's guilt in her proud absence,  
In the molested rocks the shell of virgins,  
The frank, closed pearl, the sea-girl's lineaments  
Glint in the staved and siren-printed caverns,  
Is maiden in the shameful oak, omens  
Whalebed and bulldance, the gold bush of lions  
Proud as a sucked stone and huge as sandgrains.' (2)

The male principle is characterized by the image of the ravaging beast, the destroyer:

'Not from this anger, anticlimax after  
Refusal struck her loin and the lame flower  
Bent like a beast to lap the singular floods  
In a land strapped by hunger  
Shall she receive a bellyful of weeds' (10)

This 'furnace-nostrilled column-membered super-or-near man' figures largely under various guises in the poems *Unluckily for a Death* and *Into her Lying Down Head* from *Deaths and Entrances*, where the personal relationships of man and woman are worked out in terms of man's responses to a world at war, and the 'beast' image is connected by

implication with the raiding aeroplanes of the blitz time. (The image of the peace-bringing dove become the fire-bringing aeroplane, in the following extract is also used by T. S. Eliot in *Little Gidding II* and *IV*):

‘Into her lying down head  
His enemies entered bed  
Under the unencumbered eyelid,  
Through the rippled drum of the hair-buried ear;  
And Noah’s rekindled now unkind dove  
Flew man-bearing there.  
Last night in a raping wave  
Whales unreined from the green grave  
The fountains of origin gave up their love  
Along her innocence glided  
Juan aflame and savagely young King Lear  
Queen Catherine howling bare  
And Samson drowned in his hair,  
The colossal intimacies of silent  
Once seen strangers or shades on a stair.’

Thomas continues to take himself as principle subject, but not exclusively, for in this sequence the focus is naturally on the mother and child. He achieves some remarkable effects by speaking through them and giving them an individual awareness of their own parts in the violent and painful acts of creation. The mother-to-be speaks:

‘How shall my animal ... magnetise  
Towards the studded male in a bent, midnight blaze  
That melts the lionhead’s heel and horseshoes of the heart,  
A brute land in the cool top of the country days  
To trot with a loud mate the haybeds of a mile,  
Love and labour and kill  
In quick, sweet, cruel light till the locked ground sprout out,  
The black, burst sea rejoice,  
The bowels turn turtle,



Claw of the crabbed veins squeeze from each red particle  
The parched and raging voice?' (11)

The poet sees the birth set against the background of a world in turmoil and on the verge of war. The story of Christ is still in his mind, and underlines the imagery of this poem (14):

'Lapped among herods wail  
As their blade marches in  
That the eyes are already murdered,  
The stocked heart is forced, and agony has another mouth  
to feed.  
O wake to see, after a noble fall,  
The old mud hatch again, the horrid  
Woe drip from the dishrag hands and the pressed sponge of  
the forehead.'

The ending of this poem lays stress on the pain and violence of birth, as did the *Sonnet VI* in *25 Poems*; the imagery is similar also:

'this witchlike midwife second  
Bullies into rough seas you so gentle  
And makes with a flick of the thumb and sun  
A thundering bullring of your silent and girl-circled island.'  
(14)

The comment on this, in the next poem, is by the child itself, speaking from the womb. It is already conscious of the pain it will bring and the sadness of life leading to death:

'If my bunched monkey coming is cruel  
Rage me back to the making house. My hand unravel  
When you sew the deep door. The bed is a cross place.'

But the mother answers, knowing there can be no escape from living and death:

'Thrust, my daughter or son, to escape, there is none, none,  
none,  
Nor when all ponderous heaven's host of waters breaks ...  
Rest beyond choice in the dust-appointed grain  
At the breast stored with seas. No return  
Through the waves of the fat streets, nor the skeleton's thin  
ways.'  
(15)

The poem *This Side of the Truth (For Llewelyn)* also makes the same point:

'all is undone. ...  
Before you move to make  
One gesture of the heart or head. ...  
And the wicked wish. ...  
Is cast before you move  
And all your deeds and words  
Each truth, each lie,  
Die in unjudging love.'

This, though, belongs to a later stage of development. Poem 5 in *The Map of Love* identifies the child with time and grief. Church ritual is used as coördinating image: a kind of christening ceremony attended by angels and devils, come to bless or curse, as in a folk-tale. The birth of a child, presupposing as it does both life and death, brings but one more perpetuation of the negative cycle of time which is birth, growth, decay and death, and for which man must grieve:

'Time marks a black isle kindle from a brand of ashes,  
Grief with dishevelled hands tear out the altar ghost  
And a firewind kill the candle.'

The same bell, still tolled by the sleepy man of winter, rings peals for baptism and knells for death, rings for matins and curfew:

'A white child. ...

Out of the font of bone and plants at that stone tocsin  
 Scales the blue wall of spirits;  
 From blank and leaking water sails the child in colour,  
 Shakes in crabbed burial shawl, by sorcerer's insect  
 woken  
 Ding dong from the mute turrets.' (5)

This is also expressed more succinctly in the italicised central stanza of *Ballad of the Long Legged Bait in Deaths and Entrances*:

*'Time is bearing another son.  
 Kill Time! She turns in her pain!  
 The oak is felled in the acorn  
 And the hawk in the egg kills the wren.'*

Joy, pain; grief, creation have been experienced, but as yet there is no end nor any satisfying purpose, only a direction:

*'In the final direction of the elementary town  
 I advance for as long as forever is.'* (16)

In *Deaths and Entrances* Thomas returns to this point in the sequence of pattern-poems called *Vision and Prayer* and gives it a more truly apocalyptic treatment, in which, as in the vision on Patmos, light is seen after darkness; after the agony of birth has been endured the resurrection of man is found. As before, in the sonnet sequence, normally distinct incidents of religious history are blended, giving a sense of timelessness to the elemental emotions and mental questioning expressed through them. The beginning of the poem emphasises the lonely and helpless state of parents and child at the dark and fearful moment of birth; but by the third stanza it is apparent that the implications of this theme are to be developed beyond the personal experience: the incarnate child is reconciler of the 'mind and heart of love', just as Christ born and crucified synthesised the duality of the body

and soul and made history one timeless moment by his love. Thus the whole poem is a development from both the sonnet sequence in *25 Poems*, and the birth themes in *The Map of Love*. In Thomas's *Vision*, nativity, death and resurrection are seen collaterally:

‘the first dawn  
Furied by his stream  
Swarms in the kingdom come  
Of the dazzler of heaven  
And the splashed mothering maiden  
Who bore him with a bonfire in  
His mouth and rocked him like a storm.’

‘For I was lost who have come  
To dumbfounding heaven  
And the finding one  
And the high noon  
Of his wound  
Blinds my  
Cry.’

‘There  
Crouched bare  
In the shrine  
Of his blazing  
Breast I shall waken  
To the judge blown bedlam  
Of the uncaged sea bottom  
The cloud climb of the exhaling tomb  
And the bidden dust upsailing  
With his flame in every grain.’

Man and dust rise up together. The veins of the body and the veins of rock return to their natural unity. Genesis and Apocalypse coexist in the ascension of man at his true moment of origin:

'The  
 Born sea  
 Praised the sun  
 The finding one  
 And upright Adam  
 Sang upon origin!  
 O the wings of the children!  
 The wounded flight of the ancient  
 Young from the canyons of oblivion!  
 The sky stride of the always slain  
 In battle! the happening  
 Of saints to their vision!  
 The world winding home!  
 And the whole pain  
 Flows open  
 And I  
 Die.'

Section II, the *Prayer* is more complex. The gifts of the vision are too great for sinners' conscience to bow to or accept; the preceding fall alone is apprehensible by man who prays:

'He let the dead lie though they moan  
 For his briared hands to hoist them  
 To the shrine of his world's wound  
 And the blood drop's garden  
 Endure the stone  
 Blind host to sleep  
 In the dark  
 And deep  
 Rock.'

It would be better for man 'never to awake and arise', to remain in limbo, rather than to be exposed to such a terrible annunciation for which he is unworthy, to a judgment of his sinful existence. But for sin, with humility, there is the forgiveness of the consuming, refining flame of love, and the ending of the poem recalls that of Eliot's *Four Quartets*:



'I turn the corner of prayer and burn  
In a blessing of the sudden  
Sun. In the name of the damned  
I would turn back and run  
To the hidden land  
But the loud sun  
Christens down  
The sky.  
I  
Am found  
O let him  
Scald me and drown  
Me in his world's wound  
His lightning answers my  
Cry. My voice burns in his hand  
Now I am lost in the blinding  
One. The sun roars at the prayer's end.'

This Christ-given power to conquer death by love is put forward by Thomas as in the elegy *In Memory of Ann Jones* (*The Map of Love: Poem 8*):

'In a room with a stuffed fox and a stale fern,  
I stand, for this memorial's sake, alone  
In the snivelling hours with dead, humped Ann  
Whose hooded, fountain heart once fell in puddles,  
Round the parched worlds of Wales, and drowned each  
sun.'

The poet calls her virtues to witness, 'that her love sing and swing through a brown chapel', and suggests, through the symbols of the fox and fern that this love might bring even death to life:

'These cloud-sopped, marble, hands, this monumental  
Argument of the hewn voice, gesture and psalm  
Storm me forever over her grave until

The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love  
And the strutting fern-lay seeds on the black sill.'

This poem was one of the first examples of more objective writing in Thomas's work, and greatly in advance of earlier poems in the clarity of its theme and structure and the sustaining of its effect.

Coherence of imagery, validity of symbols, and a balance of reason, emotion and imagination are all achieved in *A Winter's Tale*, certainly one of the finest poems of this century. It is a very much expanded recension of lines 3-12 of the first poem in *The Map of Love*, an expression of romantic love culminating in an ecstatic union, above, and apart from, time and death. In the first half of the poem, mounting and sweeping sentences of narrative mingled with detailed description are prelude to an annunciation, itself introduced by two stanzas marked off by the expectancy of the single words: 'Listen. . . . Listen!

'It was a hand or sound  
In the long ago land that glided the dark door wide  
And there outside on the bread of the ground  
A she bird rose and rayed like a burning bride.  
A she bird dawned, and her breast with snow and scarlet  
downed.'

Following this, and similarly introduced by two stanzas marked off with 'Look. . . . Look!' the latter half is a prelude to the union itself

'And the wings glided wide and he was hymned and wedded  
And through the thighs of the engulfing bride,  
The woman breasted and the heaven headed  
Bird, he was brought low,  
Burning in the bride bed of love, in the whirl-  
Pool and the wanting centre, in the folds  
Of paradise, in the spun bud of the world  
And she rose with him flowering in her melting snow.'

The icy landscape in which the man

‘In the muffled house, in the quick of night  
At the point of love, forsaken and afraid’

weeps and prays, is built up from separate observations of ‘all the woken form at its white trades’ under winter snow into a mysterious symphony of whiteness. Symbols in the first half, snow, water, the minstrels, the nightingale, the rock, the oak, birds and horses, recur and are given further meaning in the second. *A Winter's Tale* may be likened to the biblical *Song of Songs*, in that its interpretation may be taken on three levels: literally as the love story of magic fairy-tale character; as an allegory of romantic, but profane love; or as an allegory of sacred love. The first two interpretations need no comment, and the third will cause no surprise to those familiar with Thomas's equations of sex and religion:

‘His naked need struck him howling and bowed  
Though no sound flowed down through the handfolded  
air ...  
And his nameless need bound him burning and lost ...  
When ... he should run ... and lie curled caught  
In the always desiring centre of the white  
Inhuman cradle and the bridebed forever sought  
By the believer lost and the hurled outcast of light.’

Thomas has achieved in this poem, through a more precise handling of images, a complex effect which is nevertheless immediately understood; he has achieved richness of texture without clogging the line, and music by a considerable, though surprisingly unobtrusive use of internal alliteration and assonance to go with the end-rhymes. The poem is bound to lose by part-quotation, for its major effects are broad and it must, and does, stand as a complete whole, every part supporting the other, Thomas's most sustained piece.

It is fitting to leave consideration of the poems themselves with some remarks on *Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait*. This poem more than any other of Thomas's comes in the category of what Herbert Read called 'absolute poetry'. It is the spontaneous welling up of an intensely personal vision, a vision that is truly apocalyptic and which overloads the very words trying to convey it; and yet it irresistably carries the reader on into unfamiliar regions. In symbols and imagery it is a compendium of everything elsewhere in Thomas's work. Its setting and atmosphere are reminiscent of Rimbaud's *Bateau Ivre*, and indeed Thomas's aims might be summed up in Rimbaud's words quoted as epigraph to this essay. Thomas has also been compared to Coleridge, and if parts of *A Winter's Tale* remind of *Frost at Midnight*, the *Ballad* has affinities with the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

'He saw the storm smoke out to kill  
With fuming bows and ram of ice,  
Fire on starlight rake Jesu's stream;  
And nothing shone on the water's face

But the oil and bubble of the moon,  
Plunging and piercing in his course  
The lured fish under the foam  
Witnessed with a kiss.' (Long Legged Bait)

If this applies there must be another Livingston-Lowes and another *Road to Xanadu* before the implications of Thomas's poem are fully realized. Further meanings unfold with each reading: an interpretation of the creative sexual act in terms of the universe? Man's search for 'his long-legged heart'? God's vision of the redemption of creation and time? So on, as the reader will – whatever analysis is made, poetry such as this carries him on whether he will or no, and because of this compulsion it must stand high in the estimation of those who appreciate the music of words and the truth of vision.

## 5

Thomas has written in some detail about certain aspects of his poetic technique; how especially his earlier poems were a personal sublimation preceding a search for truth:

‘Poetry, recording the stripping of the individual darkness, must, inevitably, cast light upon what has been hidden for too long and by so doing make clean and naked exposure.’

This much was learnt from Freud and its effect on content has been noted. What Thomas has assimilated of Joyce’s linguistics, Biblical myth and Hopkins’s technique is plain enough. Now he has largely outgrown the more obtrusive of his personal tricks: the sinister, dry wit:

‘In spring we cross our foreheads with the holly,  
Heigh ho and blood and berry,  
And nail the merry squires to the trees;’

the half-puns:

‘all hollowed man, muscling in of love, minstrel angle’;

the invented words and unusual compounds:

‘blowclock, fingerman, natron, pin-hilled, man-iron, hemlock-headed, linen-spirit, sixth of wind, sky-blue-trades;’

these tricks are merely details in the larger pattern where they fall into their places.

Thomas has also written about his elliptic use of imagery:

‘A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. ... Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed.’

It is the high frequency of this cycle of images that makes Thomas’s work so difficult to understand, for the reader is



bound to lag behind on one image while the poet has flashed over to another. This method of building up a poem without the intermediate logical links between image and image, of relying on juxtaposition rather than progression, is not new. Thomas is doing word for word what Eliot in *The Waste Land* was doing line by line.

The object, Thomas says, is "to get things straight." Out of the inevitable conflict of images – inevitable because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war – I try to recreate that momentary peace which is a poem.'

It would seem, therefore, that to this poet a poem is a momentary crystallization of normally distinct and contrary atoms of experience, one 'still' from the flickering and continuously moving picture of life.

The continuity of life, and the recurrence, in and apart from the rise and fall of civilizations, of organic patterns in the soul's history have been subjects forced to the notice of those poets concerned with ultimate truths rather than with immediate objects. This continuity and these truths have necessarily a contemporary application, otherwise they would be irrelevant texts, but poets have tended to present them, not in the restrictive terms of the contemporary world, but by universal and timeless symbols of wider validity. For example to T. S. Eliot, the waste land is all time and towns, 'Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria'; for Edith Sitwell

'The Judas-coloured sun is gone  
And with the Ape thou art alone;'

Bone, Sun, Fire, Ape, Old Woman, Harvest are poetic symbols of permanent relations in the life of the spirit of man, as she interprets it.

Thomas also adopts a system of symbols to carry part of his meaning in his enquiry into the springs of life. His main recurrent image is that of water – not still water, for he is certainly no Lake poet – but moving, turbulent, powerful

water: seas, tide and fountain. There is scarcely a poem in the four volumes where this symbol is not used. *A Winter's Tale*, a land and air poem, is the one notable exception. The idea behind the symbol appears first to derive from *Genesis i*, 'the darkness on the face of the deep' out of which came the land, and all created things, including man. The sea, rather than the dust, is the universal womb and grave:

'In the beginning was the pale signature. ...

And after came the imprints on the water.'

'The god of beginning in the intricate sea-whirl.'

'The force that drives the water through the rocks  
Drives my red blood.'

'The dry Sargasso of the tomb.'

The sea is also the 'spray-based rock-chested' masterful male principle, 'the Kingdom of Genesis' thunder', associated with the majesty and power of the whale:

'Whales in the wake like capes and Alps

Quaked the sick sea and snouted deep,

Deep the great bushed bait with raining lips

Slipped the fins of those humpbacked tons

And fled their love in a weaving dip.

Oh, Jericho was falling in their lungs.'

This association of sea and whales leads to Melville's *Moby Dick* and there are some interesting parallels between the symbolism of Melville and that of Thomas on points more complex than the one mentioned by the latter of 'Jonah's Moby.' The most interesting is this passage from *Moby Dick*, Ch. CXXXII, which gives the substance of thought underlying several passages of Thomas's work:

'Air and sea were hardly separable – only the air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust male sea heaved with long lingering swells, like Samson's chest in his sleep. ... To and fro in the deeps, far down in the bottomless blue rushed mighty leviathans,

swordfish and sharks, and these were the strong troubled murderous thinkings of the masculine sea.'

Thomas has the following:

'He'll bathe his raining blood in the male sea,  
And wind his globe out of your water thread.'  
(She) 'rides the imagined oceans of the male wards.'  
'Last night in a raping wave  
Whales unreined from the green grave  
In fountains of origin gave up their love.'

It is possible that Thomas has been influenced by Melville, but the personal experiences onto which he loaded the symbolism must have been of the rivers, weather, and sea of his native Glamorgan. Whatever the origin, the result is a body of sea imagery of immense scope, though of concentrated meaning. The other elements, air, earth and fire, the sun and the moon, the globe of Earth, the planets and the stars, the she-bird and the beast, the phoenix and the dove – all enlarge the emotional horizon beyond the world of man into the cosmos itself; they play their part in the whole vision and have been noted in context.

As important as his scope of imagery is Thomas's range of sound. His poems gain much by being read aloud, for many of the juxtapositions of words are musical sequences. Pitch is generally high; the poems are rhetorical, full of bravura phrasing, yet always based on the sounding of the 'harp-shaped voice'. Like Donne's poems they open well, driving straight into the main theme in forceful language:

'When like a running grave time tracks you down.'

'Death is all metaphors; shape one history.'

'It is the sinner's dust-tongued bell claps me to churches.'

'There was a Saviour

Rarer than radium

Commoner than water, crueller than truth.'

The texture of his verse is rich from a sensual appreciation of words, as though the poet smacked them over on his tongue and found them good. His poems live by the sound and emotional contexts of their words. In his use of language he is not what Spender has called a 'transparent' poet – his thought is not seen through the stained-glass windows of his language; but he is an 'opaque' poet – his impressions are formed as images which together make up a whole tapestry of crowded design and contrasting vivid colours which is the whole poem.

'A monstrous image, blindly  
Magnified out of praise'

it may be, yet it is impelling by the skilful weaving of many-hued strands into a new and strange pattern. Only one must be content to look *at* it; not grumble because one cannot see through it.

Finally some estimate must be made of Thomas's position in the contemporary world of writers and readers. The exact nature of the difficulty facing him is given well by Marshall W. Stearns (*Transformation* 3):

'Thomas typifies the problem of the poet of our time who has something original to say and an original way of saying it. Writing ill-paid poetry in a complex age of prose, where the emphasis is upon originality, he has often sacrificed clarity in order to forge a highly individual idiom. This idiom is new and therefore difficult, and, largely for these reasons, unpopular. But it is also, I feel, valid. ... In the history of poetry, the number of people who found any poet worth the effort of comprehension was never great and Dylan Thomas will have to be satisfied with less.'

Thomas himself wrote:

'Not for the proud man apart  
From the raging moon I write  
On these spindrift pages



Nor for the towering dead  
With their nightingales and psalms  
But for the lovers, their arms  
Round the griefs of the ages  
Who pay no praise or wages  
Nor heed my craft or art.'

He writes against what he fears in the world he lives in; he writes of what he has felt and reasoned of elemental truth; he writes for himself and his readers. In a consideration of his poems and their worth, the fact that he may be 'the rallying point for poets' in the Auden reaction, or the talisman of the 'Apocalyptic Movement' does not matter. He is in the line of English poets, and he has extended that line, bringing back originality and invention to language and a closer relation of form and content. Henry Reed called Eliot the formal Christian man, and Edith Sitwell the formal pagan woman: Thomas partakes of both. He shares with both their power to see through the immediate object the timeless pattern; like Eliot's, his work revealed a remarkable continuity and singleness of purpose not apparent until the publication of the latest volume; like Edith Sitwell, he makes the opacity of his verse-texture living thought clothed in brightness. There has been a tendency on the part of Eliot's critics to treat of the thought as separate from the poetry, indeed to complain that Eliot has developed philosophy at the expense of poetry; Edith Sitwell has had the form of her poetry praised rather than the content. It is to be hoped that Thomas will suffer from neither extreme. If this essay emphasises content and makes little æsthetic critical judgment on the poems, it is because an 'approach' of this kind will of necessity proceed with broad explanations in the hope that more detailed appreciation will come to the reader after the study Thomas deserves and richly repays. He has, like so many poets before him, been well in advance of his age, which only now is beginning to follow his lead and discern his visions.





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